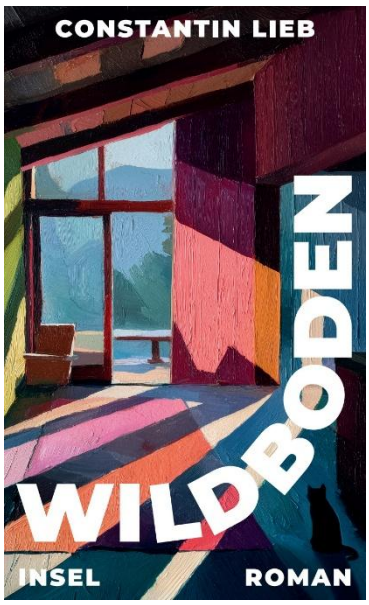

Constantin Lieb

Wildboden

A Novel

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pp. 15–24; 81–87, 178–188, and 231

[pp. 15–24]

Erna opened the wooden window shutters and secured them – struggling slightly – to the rusty hooks in the house wall. They would have to be replaced soon, before they fell victim to the next storm or snowfall. She wouldn't tell him; she would just see to it herself. Under no circumstances did she want to bother him with trivialities. He had suffered several nervous episodes over the past few weeks, and it was better not to give him any reason to get unnecessarily agitated.

Erna turned and paused for a moment by the windowsill. The rugs in front of her began to gleam. She loved the moment when the colours of the floor and walls were set ablaze by the morning sun, transforming the room into a magnificent showroom, a ray of hope amidst the mountains' oppressive silence.

The living room was her favourite spot in the house besides her bedroom, and it had become her sanctuary. They had silently agreed that he wouldn't enter it. Unlike the other rooms in the house, it held a little of the aura of the Dresden and Berlin ateliers, and it was here that she felt most alive.

She would have to go into the village today, to buy groceries and drop off letters at the post office. Perhaps it would be a good idea to fetch fresh milk from the neighbours, even though Erna had little desire to see Farmer Ruesch, who didn't miss a single opportunity to make her feel that her presence was merely tolerated here. He was right, in truth; she was a city person and didn't belong here. But after fifteen years in Frauenkirch, it was draining to still be on the receiving end of sceptical looks and the sharp comments of its otherwise taciturn inhabitants – who were called *abutters* here, which Erna found odd. Berlin was far away, and Fehmarn even further.

Had he ever missed her, when she'd been looking after the atelier and he was taking the cure in the Swiss mountain air? She liked the thought that he had longed for her, even though it seemed unlikely.

After a gloomy June and the first rainy, cold days of July, Erna was pleased to see the rays of morning sunshine. The short trip to Zurich had done her good. It had been a necessary distraction, and her arm was now back to normal following the accident. The fracture had healed, and only occasionally did she still feel a pulling sensation in the tendon. She went outside, sat down on the bench by the entrance, leaned against the glass porch and watched Kirchner at work. The past winter had taken its toll on him, he looked bony and gaunt, and his shoulders protruded sharply from beneath his shirt. Ever since the Swiss pine wood blocks had been delivered, he had been spending the days almost entirely outside, sculpting the figures of the relief for the school entrance. He proceeded carefully, loyal to his design and the approved model, trying to let the figures emerge as cleanly and simply as possible from the wooden blocks, wanting to interlace them in such a way that they would appear to have been carved from one single block. It was impossible to predict what the Frauenkirch residents would make of it, because only very few of them had developed an understanding for his art over the past years. Under no circumstances did he want to aggravate them; he

wanted to give them something back. After all this time, he was still striving to be accepted by them. And yet more than a few of the neighbours often shook their heads about the c*razy painter up there* – as they called him. This was why she found his ambition really moving.

"It's getting there," she said. Heat flooded into her head. She hoped he wouldn't rebuke her for this uninspired comment.

"If they don't like it, I'll step back from the commission," he said, simultaneously taking a step backwards, as though to give his statement more weight.

"I'm sure Gaberel wouldn't allow that," said Erna.

Kirchner seemed good-tempered, so the tension ebbed out of her body. The Bern architect Rudolf Gaberel had long been a good influence up here. Not only had he constructed the forest cemetery in Lärchenhain, which was located not far from their house on the Wildboden plateau; he had also, in spite of the economic crisis, seen to it that Frauenkirch got a new school building. Kirchner too regarded him highly, and had gladly seized the opportunity to design the entranceway. It was his first public commission in Switzerland, and it had come at just the right time, given that his sales had been falling for years now.

"He's not the one I'm worried about," he said. "If people don't like it, no one has to pay me."

Erna knew he liked the attitude behind this statement more than its actual consequences. He wanted to give the impression that he didn't care about money, but he couldn't actually afford not to.

"The fee's ridiculous anyway," answered Erna.

She didn't want to suppress the remark. She knew how much time he had spent on the sketches and preliminary studies.

He nodded. Now he looked at her for the first time. Erna gave a smile, which he ignored.

“If they don’t want it at the school, we’ll just take it back,” she said, gently provocative.

“So how do you like it?” asked Kirchner, without taking his gaze off the seven wooden blocks, on which the figures’ rough forms were already discernible.

“It fits this place. It’s just right,” she said.

Kirchner silently sat down next to her and pulled a cigarette out of its crumpled bright packaging.

“You could have been a politician.”

He lit the cigarette and took a deep, long drag. Erna pushed the limestone ashtray toward him. She smiled, not for him, but for herself, her gaze directed downward at her fingertips, where the skin was flaking slightly. He rarely showed humour towards her; he was a torturously serious character. She relished these few moments of levity, even though she was aware that he probably didn’t even register them.

“Who knows, perhaps I will be someday.”

Kirchner gave her a quizzical look and continued smoking, still silent.

“Blood,” she said suddenly, pointing toward his wrist.

A splinter had bored its way into his flesh. One, two drops of blood, already dried, had merged between the crusty flecks of oil paint and delicate splashes on his skin. With the cigarette in the corner of his mouth, he tried to pull the splinter out of the ball of his hand, pressing on it until the tiny wound began to bleed even more.

“And you should have been a surgeon,” said Erna, reaching for his hand in order to help. “With a villa at Elbufer in Dresden or Wannsee in Berlin. With a bath tub. Plumbing. And electricity. Not an outhouse and a wash basin.”

“And end up suffocating from boredom,” he said, then added after a brief pause: “From mediocrity.”

“Or the caviar that your rich admirers bestow on you because you’ve resculpted their noses and breasts so beautifully. You’d still be working in the plastic arts, just not with wood.”

The sun was blinding them both. Erna couldn’t properly tell from his facial expression whether she had managed to boost his spirits. Perhaps it was just a brief grimace, due to the glare, that made the corners of his mouth lift slightly.

“Are you having a better day today?” he asked, pulling his hand back in order to tend to the splinter himself.

Erna was surprised that he had asked her so openly. Her persistent melancholy over the past weeks had been another reason for her spending a few days in town. She hadn’t been able to bear it anymore. The house, the same sounds over and over, the persistent smell of tobacco, of paints, oils and thinners, the eternal view of the valley and mountains, her endless worry about him. She had felt so terribly tired, as though she would never wake up again. She had dragged herself through the days with her eyes downcast and steps heavy, sometimes feeling as though a monster were sitting on her shoulders, wickedly pushing his weight down on her. Kirchner had his work. Erna had her assigned place in his work.

She nodded.

“Good,” he answered. “We still need to send the transfer form to the Association of Artists, I don’t know if we’ll even manage via the foreign bank before the deadline. It all takes so long nowadays.”

“Should we write to Hagemann and ask if he can help? It’s not much, after all. Ten Marks?”

Kirchner had succeeded. He had pulled the astonishingly long splinter out of the ball of his hand and now laid it demonstratively on the table, where it was barely visible against the wood. Then he stood up, murmured an abstruse “That’s how it’s done, my little chick,” and retreated so hurriedly into the house that one might have thought he couldn’t bear it out here, with Erna, a second longer. It annoyed her that he addressed her with the pet name. She stayed sitting. Not because of the view, which did look particularly breathtaking today, but because she didn’t want to run after him. A small act of resistance that he wouldn’t even notice. After the past days in Zürich, she needed to readjust to their shared world. And she did that better at a distance. So she stayed seated and listened to the sounds coming from inside the house. To every step that Kirchner took on the stairs, every movement on the upper floor, in the atelier space that was located directly above the living room. A plaintive creaking, a squeaking and clattering. As solid as the house looked from the outside, internally it seemed makeshift and brittle.

Her gaze fell on the wooden splinter. She picked it up with the tip of her left thumb and studied it closely. She had wanted to ask whether he’d written to Gransee to ask for his parents’ marriage certificate. A tiresome subject. They would need it if he was serious about marrying her after all these years, as he had hinted a few weeks ago. But she hadn’t found the courage to say something. Partly because she wanted to hear it from him, without needing to ask. Erna put her index finger against her thumb and pressed, the skin yielded, a tangible resistance, she pressed more firmly, the splinter broke through the surface of her skin. As she released her finger, a small drop of blood oozed out. She flinched, licked away the blood and flicked the splinter away towards the fence, whose colourfully painted slats sometimes gave her a feeling of safety; that is, when she didn’t feel like she was in a prison.

Many years later, once the tragedy lay far back enough in the past that it would no longer occupy every one of her thoughts, she would contemplate repainting the fence, then

dismiss the idea, because no matter how eerie the location, house, shed, garden and fence may seem to her, they would still remain an ensemble, an organism that obeyed only its own rules.

Kirchner knew that his doctor, Dr. Frédéric Bauer, would be travelling frequently over the coming weeks and therefore rarely be in the park sanatorium, and so despite his fear that he would seem like a petitioner, he wrote him a friendly letter, albeit with an incredibly direct request. He needed additional prescriptions before his supply of Oxycodone ran out. That morning, he had only been able to find three and a half boxes, each containing three vials. It was only Wednesday, so even with a reduced dose that wouldn't last him to the weekend. He decided to enclose some already made-out prescriptions with the letter so that Dr. Bauer merely needed to sign them; something that, if necessary, even his assistant could do. This thought calmed and unsettled him in equal measure; the idea was torturous that not Dr. Bauer but his assistant would be attending to his urgent business, and might even discuss him disrespectfully or dismissively with colleagues. But there was no way around it, he had to take the risk. He needed a new prescription.

Usually, Kirchner found it easy to deal with his correspondence, but on this day the forces of the cosmos seemed to be working against him. The penultimate back tooth in his left lower jaw was hurting, as though a sadistic spirit was tormenting its root with a burning needle. After every second word, Kirchner needed to set down the fountain pen and concentrate on enduring the pain. He repeated the sentence formulations multiple times in his mind before he wrote them up. The chair he had sat on for years at this very desk in his atelier suddenly seemed uncomfortably hard, and far too high in order to be able to sit upright, and he couldn't find space for his legs, his thighs kept knocking against the underside of the desk, but he also couldn't cross them beneath the seat of the chair. He felt

like a cowering invalid, weighed down by the relentless battle against the limitations of his body. He exhaled slowly and consciously. The letter shouldn't be too long winded, he chided himself, tearing up two drafts in succession and starting over. *Dear Doctor*, he wrote. *I'm enclosing two prescriptions for you to sign, with the request that they be returned as quickly as possible. Many thanks in advance*. He broke off, read the sentences and was, to his own surprise, fully content. Why be verbose when the purpose and goal were clear? In order not to seem abrupt, he added a few details about his work on the school entrance relief, which was *laughably strenuous, but as a daily routine, provides stability and calm*. It worked. His thoughts and the writing distracted him. The tooth was forgotten. Sentences flowed out of him. The familiar confidence returned. And it felt as though his mood were correcting itself of its own accord. *I have lots of plans for the warmer months,* he wrote. *First of all, getting my body back to strength. And then work. I'm not content with myself. I know you'll smile at this. If I pull myself together, things can still work out. In spite of everything, life seems good*.

Amid this brief flicker of overconfidence, he even began to sketch in the lower right-hand corner of the letter one of the figures he was currently carving; a school pupil who was raising his right arm over his head, his index finger outstretched, while his left forearm rested on the desk. In just a few clear strokes and with flowing movements, the figure was drawn. While he studied it and compared it with the sculpture that was already finished in his imagination, sitting enthroned high above the school entrance, Kirchner realised that this relief needed to consist not of seven figures, as originally intended, but five. With the teacher in the middle, flanked on each side by two seated pupils. Anything else would be too crowded for the square entrance in the masonry. Five then, not seven, as he had recently sketched for Hagemann, five! Albeit slightly larger, the children's legs shown along with a suggestion of the desk panels; the teacher with an open book and only portrayed from the hips upwards. This was how the sculpture had to look. He felt downright euphoric, and swiftly signed off

the letter *with sincere regards*, folded it and impatiently tucked it into an envelope. He should use this momentum and immediately get to work, thought Kirchner. But first, now that there was the prospect of additional vials, he opened one of the Oxycodone boxes. The sun shimmered on the glass tube which held the transparent liquid. He gently weighed it in the palm of his hand and tried to ignore the urgent voice in his head that was whispering to him to not wait a moment longer. He allowed himself this little delaying game, an exercise in restraint, even though he was intimately acquainted with the outcome. But sometimes the thrill of the anticipation increased the intensity, a sign of that force with which he always approached his life, and which, just a few years later, would be his undoing.

[pp. 81–87]

Erna pushed the door open with her shoulder and briefly set down the milk churns in order to kick off her shoes. Kirchner was washing out his paintbrushes. He tapped them on the edge of the bucket, then laid them out in a neat row on the floor.

"The postman didn't want to come up here," said Erna. "Barbara was so nice. Here, from your brother."

She placed the letter on the kitchen counter.

"Walter or Ulrich?" he asked.

"Judging by the scrawl, I would say Ulrich."

Kirchner immediately tore open the envelope and began to read.

Erna tucked the churns away into the small cupboard next to the kitchen nook.

“What does he say?” she asked.

Kirchner was pacing nervously up and down. He didn’t need to say anything. Erna knew what it was about. They had talked about it again and again over the past weeks. They had just been waiting to see when it would happen. Hagemann had informed them about the paintings being defamed, and Professor Kurth from the Berlin print gallery had explained that the Nazis’ so-called “Cultural Act” was admittedly very controversial, but that there hadn’t been a significant counteroffensive. The newspapers were reporting on the Munich exhibition, but much had remained unclear, so Kirchner had written to his brother Ulrich in Biberach an der Riß with a request for his personal overview of the situation. Erna had argued that it may not be beneficial to ask Ulrich, of all people, because from afar the younger brother Walter seemed less receptive to the Nazis. And now Ulrich had responded.

While Kirchner read in silence and Erna wrung out a wet cloth over the washing basket, she noticed something glint beneath one of the cupboards. She seized the opportunity, quickly reached out for the empty vial and tucked it into her skirt pocket. Kirchner didn’t notice, and began to read aloud from the letter.

“*Mountain Landscape*, 1923. *Still Life*, 1924. *View into the Ravine*, 1927. *Königstein Station. Father and Son. Masters of the Bridge. Five Women. Street. Russian Dancers. Card Players*.”

His voice faltered. He cleared his throat and continued to read.

“*The Painter Stirner*. *Invalid*. *Artist’s Wife. Country Wedding*.”

Erna stood up and went over to him. In her pocket, she touched the empty morphine vial with her right hand. Kirchner handed her the letter. She scanned the lines, and already he was pulling the pages back from her.

“They can’t do that,” said Erna.

"It continues: *The Couple. Farewell. Soldier with Whore. Dancing Couple. Nude Woman Combing her Hair. Women in the Café. The Bathers.* Everything seized and exposed to ridicule in Munich."

"You can't ever go back there."

"Degenerated. Flaunted and ridiculed. They're spitting on us."

The force of this fact hit Erna. She turned around, not knowing where she was trying to go, she leaned briefly against the door frame of the living room, then pushed herself away again, a small choreography, as though she were taking a run-up for the next part of the conversation.

"Who else?" she asked eventually.

"Pechstein, Klee, Schlemmer, Dix, Schmidt-Rottluff. Almost everyone."

Kirchner closed his eyes, snorted.

"And Kandinsky."

"So, all the really good ones," said Erna quietly.

"What about Ulrich?" It was an unnecessary question.

"Listen to this," said Kirchner. "For me, National Socialism represents the fulfilment of my boldest youthful dreams. To me, it's a religion. And it has also achieved an incredible amount where the purification of art is concerned. Eventually, it will also serve justice to the German painter, regardless of their orientation, once the time comes. I believe that the "Degenerate Art" exhibition will prompt a broad section of the population to contemplate questions of art for the first time."

Kirchner looked at Erna in disbelief.

"He goes to this farce of an exhibition that these brownshirt iconoclasts have cobbled together, sees my work hanging there, reads this anti-Semitic nonsense and all he can think of

is this gushing claptrap? It makes me sick. It's no wonder that nobody's buying our pictures anymore. We need to speak to Bauer."

"There's nothing you can do about it," said Erna. "No one will reproach you for being German. You were born there, became known there, exhibited your work there. And so what? We're here now. Let's not jump the gun. Let's think things through calmly."

Thunder rumbled above. The storm clouds were already over Wildboden. They could hear the barn door banging, and almost simultaneously, the window shutters too.

"Being a naturalised Swiss citizen isn't exactly an honourable state of affairs, let alone a helpful one. And I'm far too unknown here."

"Then I should give serious thought as to whether I stay with you, my dear. If you're really such a poor match."

Kirchner didn't smile.

"Is that so?"

Erna stepped close to him so that the tips of their noses almost touched.

"Oh, come on. That was a joke."

"I never did understand your humour." He refused to be drawn in. "Your sister, now, *she* was funny."

Their gazes met.

Erna felt a stab to her heart. Why would he mention Gerda now, of all moments? Unease stirred within her.

"I know you would have preferred to have Gerda as a wife than me."

"That's all in your head. It always was. Maybe it's another symptom of one of your many ailments."

Erna looked at him with slight contempt.

“Do you sometimes imagine how it would’ve been to have her working with you, making house for you? How you would have slept with her?”

He turned away and searched for his Büttner pipe.

“Oh, sure, a bit of copulation. That doesn’t make a relationship. But she had lovely legs, that’s for sure. Not fat, barge-like legs.”

She looked at him, then put her right foot on the chair, rolled up her trouser leg and presented her thigh.

Kirchner looked away.

“Look at them! Yes, that’s how my thighs are, and so what?”

“Don’t be vulgar. Fat deposits diminish the appearance of a genuinely good physique.”

She put her leg back on the floor.

“You don’t know what love is, and I’ve made my peace with that. But there’s no need to humiliate me.”

“I’m not.”

He adopted a gentler tone.

“I’m worried about you. That’s all. The mistake you make is believing that being here is enough to make us safe. But that’s not the case. We don’t have anything here. And Ulrich’s letter confirms everything that we’ve discussed so frequently over the last few months.”

“They won’t send us back to Germany. Not after such a long time.”

Erna sat back down and used her foot to defiantly nudge one of the paintbrushes on the floor out of line. He noticed, but bit back a comment.

“We’re foreigners here, nothing more. The only thing protecting us is money. And be honest, how many paintings were sold in the last exhibition in Bern?”

“Let’s not start up with that again. You have enough friends, collectors, supporters.”

“Nonsense! Who? How many pictures were sold, Erna? Shall I tell you? The same number as the number of messages I received on my birthday. Nil. Not one single picture was sold. Not a single card received. So-called friends, collectors, supporters. Sooner or later, they all stab you in the back. We’re on our own.”

Erna was struggling to cope with his unpredictability this evening. When she eventually began to answer, he interrupted her.

“Be quiet now! I want absolute peace!”

He gathered up the paintbrushes from the floor and went upstairs. The fact that he didn’t use the narrow stepladder next to the stove, but rather the stairs with their loud, creaking steps, Erna took as a provocation. The door slammed shut, and Erna followed every step he took above her. A sentence that she had recently read came into her mind: *the aggression potential of these days was unconscionably high*.

She pictured the blank spaces gaping open in the museums. The spacious exhibition rooms, the shadows on the walls left behind by the frames’ outlines, like footprints in the snow, clues at a crime scene. And she imagined the many helpers and helpers’ helpers who have looked away, approved and assisted the confiscation of hundreds of artworks from dozens of collections and museums in order to put together this monstrosity of an exhibition. If they could do this with such ease and without resistance, what else might happen? Erna was almost ashamed of the thought. Not because it felt wrong, but because it felt foolish and obvious. They had known for years what was happening. They knew about the book burning, the Reichstag fire, the expropriation, the Aryanisation and the persecution of Jewish people, about the show trials and waves of emigration, the ban on reportage concerning Thomas Mann. They had also met Döblin as he stopped over with Königsberger on his escape to France. And of course, the Gustloff affair the previous year. The limits of what could be said and done had shifted before their eyes, and yet Erna still caught herself being surprised again

and again by the horrors which had long since become part of their lives. What could she do, here in Switzerland, given she was unsure whether she would even be allowed to remain, what would happen to her if it wasn't just known as *German Davos!* but *German Switzerland!* What would happen to her brother Kurt? She hadn't seen him for so long that Erna couldn't gauge his political stance. And now, thinking about him, she was overcome with guilt that she didn't get in touch with him more frequently. But a shared childhood doesn't necessarily lead to a shared life, and her brother had become, for her, less an actual person and more a mere name, if she were honest with herself. And that only made her more afraid.

She heaved herself up and went outside, took a deep breath in and out, and heard the babbling of the stream. At least that could be depended upon. The heavily overcast sky rumbled. A bolt of lightning shot through the valley some distance behind Frauenkirch.

She pulled the vial out of her pocket, balanced it in the palm of her hand, turned it with her index finger. It felt good, round and smooth, even seductive. Then she raised her arm and threw it as far as she could into the darkness.

"You'll get a chill."

Kirchner touched her shoulder. He had quietly come outside. She crossed her arms over her chest like a shield. He put his palm against the back of her neck, an awkward gesture of reconciliation, then went back inside the house. Even though it began to rain, she didn't want to follow him.

[pp. 178–188]

One could have accused the sun of possessing a certain cynicism, so powerfully and seductively did it blaze down over the Wildboden plateau during the days when Erna didn’t leave the house. The glass wind catcher sparkled. The window shutters nestled close to the external walls. The fence, which had been painted the previous day and encircled the house, garden and barn like a belt, bordered a property that, strictly speaking, was too large for just one person. And in the night, the moon shone down like a searchlight on the forest cemetery beyond, marking the spot where a new resident would soon arrive.

News of the painter Ernst Ludwig Kirchner's death soon spread, from Wildboden to Frauenkirch, from there with the postal bus to Davos, and via letter and train further on to Basel and Zurich, then over the borders to Germany and Austria.

Lise was the first to drop by unannounced, with a bottle of cognac and a bouquet of arnica from her garden. Erna was happy to see her friend's familiar face, though she could barely show it, and she only just managed to nod as she reached for the brightly-shining bouquet. She went over to the wash basin, ran water into a large, enamelled mug which Kirchner had used to collect his clean paintbrushes just a few days before, and set the bouquet on the table. Lise sat down at a respectful distance. It took a while before Erna could let her friend hug her. After all, it was a different thing; being alone with the grief and the shock of sudden solitude, or having someone else looking on. The cognac helped a little. Erna was reluctant to find the words for what had happened, and so the two friends stayed silent and drank until the following morning, when, just after Erna had managed to fall asleep, Lise went down to the village to fetch cheese, sausages and bread. When she got back to Wildboden an hour later, she found the door locked and the enamel mug with the flowers on the terrace table. Lise set down the shopping bag and pulled out the piece of paper which had been weighted down beneath the mug.

"Dear Lise, life must be bearable after all, if it gives me a friend like you. Your presence was incredibly calming. And knowing that you are close by makes my heart beat a little more lightly. Please don't think badly of me that I couldn't utter a word. It's no wonder that language gets lost when love has so suddenly disappeared. And yes, I wrote *love*, even though you'll surely protest, because what use is a love that's a one-way street, as you said to me once last summer. But it wasn't entirely like that. I'll try to pull myself together again so that we can talk about everything soon. Please give me a little time. And don't worry – there's already enough of that in the world. Erna."

Initially it was the familiar routines, the well-practised movements, habits and rituals that had lost their meaning. Mixing the Ovaltine he had drunk for his stomach complaints. Watering the garden early in the morning, because the sight of it had given him joy every time he came home. Airing the rooms upstairs when he was in the barn or forest, to protect him from the smell of the oil and watercolour paints. Emptying the ashtrays. Erna smoked so infrequently that all she needed was the small glass ashtray he had given her, stolen from the Kohnstamm sanatorium in the Taunus mountains.

"I've been dead since 1916 already," he'd said to her just a few weeks ago, meaning his stay there, where he had painted his *Bathers* on the walls of the tower stairwell, a vibrant fresco which brought to life indoors an unobstructed view of the outside world, as though one were standing in the midst of nature, among its enthusiasts. He and Erna had known one another for four years already when he was sent to Taunus, on a doctor's recommendation, following a mental breakdown during the recruit training in Halle. Four years was a considerable amount of time, but looking back it seemed to Erna like the prologue to her actual life.

She wondered whether this five-part, towering mural painting in Germany had already been painted over or hewn off, on account of being classified degenerate. It was unbearable, the idea of the obliteration, the works becoming phantoms in enforced white. The only thing that calmed her in moments like these, when her thoughts spiralled, was this: Kirchner had been more afraid of insignificance and mediocrity than he had been of disappearing.

Before long, Erna's days began to blur together. She moved around less, got up one day in order to sit on the bench by the entrance, then got up another day and didn't even go outside, merely to the big table in the living room, where she sat for a while before slowly climbing the ladder to the atelier and back down again. Eventually, she no longer saw any point in getting up at all, and remained in her wooden, ornate bed in the narrow room with the

Kelim-covered armchair, sewing machine and child-sized writing desk. She thought about all the rooms, which without exception were stuffed with paintings, watercolours, prints and drawings, graphics and sketches, books and notebooks. Only now did she notice how unbelievably cramped everything was. The cupboards could barely be closed, the drawers overflowed, and the wind-permeated annex, this wooden shack she had seldom entered, was filled with tools and materials. It all threatened to suffocate her. She just wanted to lie there and let the days and nights pass her by. Perhaps, she thought, that way she could just disappear.

But she couldn't. Erna didn't disappear; she couldn't hide from death nor from life. One night she was jolted out of her sleep, and in her dozy state, she thought she could hear someone above her. It wasn't unusual for the house to make noises at night: it was old, the floorboards were warped, the wind made the window shutters bang, mice scurried through the gap beneath the door. But this time it was different. Erna thought she could hear muffled footsteps above. She remembered how Kirchner's right heel would sometimes bob rhythmically up and down when he sat on the stool in front of the easel. She sat upright when something suddenly fell over upstairs and shattered on the floor. This couldn't be her imagination! Erna tried to go back to sleep. The possibility of a ghostly presence felt preferable to her than any of the more probable and trivial explanations.

The next morning, she climbed for the first time up the stepladder, which before now only he had used, into the atelier. She heaved herself through the small hole in the ceiling into the room and saw the shards of the large colourful ceramic mug in which Kirchner had stored his paintbrushes. It had clearly been so close to the edge of the table that a small vibration had been enough to tip it over. To her right, his easel stood in the corner between the two windows, and upon it, still, the *Flock of Sheep*. The longer she looked at the painting, the more her heart began to pound. The room blurred, her tears flowed. As hard as she had tried

over the past days to deny the reality of his death, now she could no longer hold herself back. She lost control of her body, could no longer feel it. She heard herself sigh and sob and was simultaneously amazed that she was the one making these sounds. The bleak, snow-covered mountain landscape in the painting, the sheep tinged with golden-yellow light, the certainty that he was the last one to have seen it, that he had dedicated all his attention to it, made her feel his definitive absence. Her gaze searched the room, finding traces of him everywhere, his rumpled, makeshift bed next to the hatch on the floor, the cigarette stubs that lay around like dead flies, the torn-out pages of sketches, the crumpled cloths, paintbrushes, pieces of stretcher frame and dried-up paint and wax tubes. And in that moment, a path suddenly appeared before Erna, something new and unknown. She couldn't yet fully grasp it, but it was there, overwhelmingly so. With every beat of her heart, she felt the responsibility to dedicate herself to preserving his life's work. She sank down onto her knees, propped her hands against the floor and stayed there on all fours in the shape of a bridge, as though she wanted to offer the burden that was settling over her a larger surface. She couldn't help but laugh, at herself and the almost ridiculous pose, reminded of how she and Gerda had taken turns at playing horse and rider when they were small. The reassuring feeling of her sister's weight on her back, of becoming an animal. She let out a gentle whimper and leaned further forwards until the tip of her nose touched one of the paint flecks on the wooden floor. The oil and watercolour remnants crossed the rooms of the house like a trail, from the atelier to the hallway, to the hand press, through the graphics room and guest bedrooms into the painting chamber, down the stairs to the entrance hall, into the living room up to the door of her small bedroom. A connection through space and time. Erna was suddenly overcome with wild laughter, and she kept breaking out into horselike-neighing, watched only by the portraits that were leaned against the wall, silently surrounding her.

"Two shots," she said eventually, turning onto her back. "There were two shots."

She stared at the ceiling of the atelier. Her words echoed as though in a court room. Her rib cage rose and sank, now calmer and more even. Never before had she perceived her own life as a responsibility.

In the next moment, she jumped up and flung open all the windows in the house. Strength had returned to her body. His death wasn't her failure. She took the limestone ashtray out of his atelier. It was somewhat bulky, with a figure snuggled up to its edge in the gentle curve of an embryo. She carried it into her own room, put it on the desk and lit a cigarette. She took two, three drags before taking the uppermost envelope from the pile of black-edged condolence letters, opened it and began to read. She enjoyed the sensation of repeatedly exhaling small clouds of smoke.

Two shots. That much was irrefutably clear. He had killed himself.

Erna picked up a piece of paper and began to answer the first letter, then the second, and then – moving into a frenzy of clarification – the third, fourth and fifth letter. She wrote about the *silent tragedy* that had played out here over the past months, about Kirchner's fear of an imminent war, about the re- traumatisation of his pacifist spirit and the illness that had destroyed him from the inside. The humiliation, as a pioneer and innovator of German art, of being defamed as degenerate and spat upon. This was what he hadn't been able to bear any longer. She described his psychological and physical pain, the terrible suffering that, despite all her care and her own battle, she hadn't been able to alleviate. Everything in vain; she had failed! She wrote it all as vividly as she felt it. And all of a sudden, her grief was much less suffocating. It felt freeing to capture her thoughts and send them out into the world. She wrote to Frau Doktor Spengler and the Grisebach-Spengler family, to the architect Gaberel, to her brother Kurt. She groped around for the truth of why he had committed suicide. And yes, she declared, she had to blame herself for not having recognised the danger sooner and acted upon it. She recounted that he had tried to convince her to go with him, to depart this world

as a pair, and that her refusal had disappointed him. He must have felt abandoned, betrayed, and she now had to live with that.

As Erna wrote, the thought intensified within her that he had initially aimed the gun at her. He had been so close to taking her with him. In accordance with his wish. But he hadn't fired. He had stepped back, turned the gun on himself and pulled the trigger for the first time. He must have missed his heart. The impact knocked him to the floor. He lay there like a helpless animal, twitching horribly. He reached for the gun that had slipped out of his hand as he fell, turned it towards his chest a second time and pulled the trigger again. There would have been enough time to stop him, thought Erna.

The next morning, as she stood with a cup of coffee in front of the house and breathed in the scent of the previous night's rain, her gaze fell on something small and sparkling. At first, she thought it was a shard of glass catching the rays of sunlight between the fence slats. She stubbed out her cigarette, left her coffee cup behind and moved closer towards it. It wasn't a shard of glass, she realised at once, but rather one of the empty oxycodone vials protruding out from the grass.

That can't be here, thought Erna, and in order to do justice to this new reality, she reached for the vial and tucked it inside her palm. Just a few metres further on, she noticed another glint, a bold play of colours, a delicate, rainbow-like column of light, red, orange, yellow, green, blue, violet. She pulled this empty vial out of the earth too, only to then find a third. Kirchner must have simply hidden them in the grass. She began to dig, eventually almost turning over the entire garden, first with her hands, then a shovel. She found vials in the flowerbeds, along the house wall, in front of the barn, next to the barn, behind the barn, even inside the barn, in the ramshackle storeroom and beneath the makeshift wooden planks in the outhouse. She found them in the drawers in the graphics room, beneath the shelves in the damp and mouldy cellar, and in his trouser pockets. She found them between the

paintings. Erna threw the vials into the metal bucket with the broken handle: dozens, hundreds of pieces of evidence for the long-lasting morphine addiction that nobody was supposed to know about. With a rock as big as a fist, she smashed up every single one of the vials, tipped the small shards into the barrel next to the barn and then climbed into the wooden bath tub filled with ice-cold water. She had to keep a clear head.

But it didn't help. How could she have been so blind? She had known about his addiction. She had spoken to Dr. Bauer about it, she had spoken to Lisa about it, but she had overlooked the full extent of it. Or had she simply done too little? Erna felt betrayed. Not only by him; by herself too.

She was freezing. She couldn't say how long she had been sitting in the tub. Her thoughts were circling around just one question. Why was she still alive? It would be easy to get up, go into the kitchen, pick up one of the sharp little knives and follow Kirchner. It wouldn't take long. Perhaps he would be pleased to see her again. Just one or two cuts, along her arteries. It would make a real mess, sure, but at least she wouldn't have to clean it up. And if she did it in the bathtub, it wouldn't look so terribly dramatic, and the pain would be muted too. Erna gave herself a shake. She didn't want to have this thought. She didn't want to die, at least not yet. She still had so much to do.

The fact that the inventory list she had drawn up wasn't sufficient, and that an expert had to be commissioned, Erna discovered from Dr. Stiffler. He was both the expert in question and the estate executor, and most importantly, a man. He now began to document from scratch everything that could be found of Kirchner's work. Erna tolerated the regular arrival of men in suits, to whom she had to present paintings and drawings. She patiently carried the desired pictures from the atelier down the narrow steps, set them up and let the men confer between themselves. But there was one picture that she didn't show them. The *Flock of Sheep* still stood on the easel in the atelier space whenever Erna was alone. The last picture he had worked on was the last picture that she kept entirely for herself. She would sometimes sit in front of it for a long time and study it with amazement; sometimes she even took it with her into her bedroom. Berlin still wasn't forgotten, but the more frequently she sat in front of the picture at night, the more familiar the thought became that she would never again leave Wildboden.

Only on the evening when she received an unexpected visit did Erna break her ritual. She had already drunk half a bottle of cognac and cranked up the old gramophone when there was a knock at the door. It was the kind of knock that could only come from somebody who knew where they were, and where they wanted to go.