



Patricia Hempel

VERLASSENE NESTER

## **ABANDONED NESTS**

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**A summer in the vacuum of the old GDR reality and a life in reunified Germany. Pilly is thirteen and desperate for change. But her family is stuck in the past. With great poetic flair, Patricia Hempel tells a story about the end of a childhood and of a nation, about an uncertain future and about the gaps in our histories.**

The Elbe border area, 1992. The mixing plants and assembly lines of the concrete factory are at a standstill. As is the life of the people in this fictional town on the water. While Pilly tries desperately to get the attention of the older Katja, her father is spending more and more time in the local pub. Her mother left long ago, supposedly to go to the West, although hardly anyone ever talks about it. Her aunts want to make their dream of the Golden West come true, and they put their livelihoods at risk to do so. Meanwhile, the old teacher from next door believes she is more closely connected with Pilly's family than anyone realises.

There is still hope for all of them this summer. But then, one afternoon, the Vietnamese contract workers' gardens burn down. And suddenly Pilly finds herself face to face with a woman who claims to be her mother.

Emerging from the heart of a barracks family, Patricia Hempel spins a narrative of the seismic shifts post-reunification: concentrated, vivid, and imbued with poetry.



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**Patricia Hempel** was born in Berlin in 1983 and studied Literary Writing in Hildesheim. She is a member of the editorial board of the queer literary magazine GLITTER and a founding member of PEN Berlin. Her novel *Abandoned Nests* was supported with a grant from the Berlin Senate and was nominated for the Alfred Döblin Prize 2023.

## **SAMPLE TRANSLATION**

**Extracts, translated by Linda L. Gaus**

### **PART I**

#### **Swallows Are Good Mothers**

##### **Chapter 1**

Summer vacation descended on the wasteland, and right in the middle of it, I turned thirteen. There were no longer many people living where we lived, in the three-story barracks on the water, across from the decommissioned concrete plant. From the shore, the housing complex looked like a chunky landslide. It overran the Elbe River's wetlands with their hidden beaches and cut into the landscape like the train tracks that ran by it toward the canal bridge. The seven buildings stood in a row like dominoes, and nothing but yarrow grew between them. In summer, the white heads of the flowers pushed up between the factory's lattice bricks, reconquering the fallow land.

My generation failed in its attempt to play soccer on these lattice bricks. Every good shot simply bounced off the sharp corners of the perforated bricks and backfired. That's why, as often as they could, the best goalkeepers moved their games to the meadow behind the barracks

until the custodian chased them away. On weekends, the mothers washed grass stains out of jerseys and combed the bricks with plastic bags for yarrow to make yarrow lemonade from for the boys playing soccer and for the girls who hung listlessly around the adjacent playground or filled animal-shaped plastic molds with sand.

Katja didn't do either of these things. When she was in the mood, she carried water in colored pails from the jetty where the rowboats were moored to the playground, and the girls fought over the pails each time she arrived. It was actually forbidden to cross the Elbe promenade and go to the shoreline alone, but Katja always said: "We're not children anymore," and proceeded to carry two pails at once.

There was a clear hierarchy on the playground: The sandbox belonged to the mudpie-girls, and the Vietnamese sat next to the asphalt on their picnic blankets and sold cigarettes. But the best part, a labyrinth of large concrete pipes, belonged to Katja and her best friend Bine. They played "family" in the pipes. Katja was the father and Bine the mother. One of the cake-girls had to play the child and was paid in cola.

"The family's already full," snarled Bine when, a few weeks before the summer vacation began, I asked for the first time whether I could play too.

“You can be the house pet if you want,” said Katja licking her tongue like people do with horses. “Cat or dog?”

Bine didn’t like this suggestion at all, and she slid right into her role: “But honey, I don’t want a pet, they just make a mess!”

Before I could decide which kind of pet I wanted to be, Katja took her belt and fastened it to the waistband of my pants: “Heel! What kind of dog do you want to be?”

“Huskies are cool,” I said, as Katja was pulling me firmly into the pipes.

“Okay, then we’ll call you Alaska.”

The apartment inside the concrete pipes was cozy. There were two beer crates in the middle; they served as a kitchen table. The bed was a foam mattress, and the refrigerator was a beach bag. Katja and Bine pushed the table together and put the child to bed; the child didn’t have to do anything but suck on its cola bottle.

“Alaska, go to your place!” Katja pressed me against the concrete and jammed my leash under the beer case she was sitting on.

“Honey, what’s for dinner?”

“Tonight, we’re having chicken fricassee.”

Bine pulled two paper plates out of the beach bag and sprinkled gummy bears on them. I got some of the fricassee but had to eat it on all fours from a sand mold that Bine had stolen from the bakery in front of the concrete pipes. She laughed and said “Eat, you stupid dog!”

### Excerpt from Chapter 5

Down at the dock, the wisps of the sawed-off willows traced patterns on the surface of the river and invisible gulls screeched, circling over the fishing net poles. Katharina stroked her fingers across the growth rings of one of the stumps and counted. Her father had told her how you could read a tree's whole life from its rings. The narrower the ring, the more difficult a year it had been. This tree seemed to have had a carefree childhood but a more difficult life in its old age. While the inner rings were as thick as a thumb, the outer ones looked more like pieces of twine.

The wood reminded Katharina of the summer when Pilly played on the burned-out meadow of the "Witches' Garden" and guests had to put damp cloths on their necks to stay cool, even as darkness was descending. She could read the water level of the Elbe from the tree stump, and the increasing storms that had disrupted the even shape of the rings. The older the willow got, the smoother the transition between the rings became, as if at some point the wind-whipped tree had stopped counting the years. That's what the worries of a tree look like, thought Katharina, and waved to Eli, who was finally aiming her boat back toward the dock. A cormorant with outspread wings had been sitting on one of the crosswise stumps ever since Eli set out, drying its



feathers in the sun. Katharina admired its persistence and ability to find benefit in the clear-cutting of the trees.

The saw blades had descended there in the same unsolicited way that her nine-year-old niece had attacked an anthill in a garden thicket. Pilly found a branch that was long enough to penetrate the hill. She rammed the stick into its sensitive center again and again until the layers of dirt and pine needles gave way. At lunch, Pilly had reported straight away about how the insects ran off in all directions. Headless, they disappeared between the clumps of the anthill or simply deserted, seeking the protection of the surrounding foliage. She had never seen so many ants at once; there had to have been more than a thousand. Eli and Katharina listened to her report with raised eyebrows and searched the “Witches’ Garden” by flashlight for the destroyed anthill after Pilly fell asleep in front of the TV. A very few ants had begun rebuilding, but most of them were still finding escape routes and trying to drag seeds, cocoons, and eggs to safety.

Martin told her that queens are in charge of every construction project. Of course, she had to confirm that right away, whispered Katharina, and Eli sighed: Her problem isn’t a lack of imagination. Did she search the pile for little metal crowns?

A week later, lone ants were still haunting the ruins of the anthill and didn't know what to do with themselves. They didn't seem to know where they belonged, and Katharina could sympathize with their aimlessness.

## Chapter 10

Katharina sat in the train heading west and was feeling off. Fields and clearings raced by the window, small wetlands, and church steeples. Everything looked as it did at home, but she couldn't shake the fear she always felt when traveling through another country. The other passengers seemed to look at her and sense that she felt she was doing something forbidden. As if the division between the two Germanys still existed. They smiled at her and nodded. They were friendly. But always with that superiority innate to Westerners.

Once, when she had caught Waldtraut listening secretly to Western radio under the thatched roof, her mother had told her that they were arrogant over there, and perhaps she wasn't so wrong. People wore their hair differently, and nearly every passenger curiously examined the haircut that Eli had trimmed for her every three months for years. Katharina could not banish the thought that with their smiling and nodding, the people in her compartment were constantly signaling to her their readiness to share the achievements of the last forty years with her. But Katharina found that presumptuous.

No one had to erase the border for her sake, and a beauty shop with giant dryer hoods that stank of chemicals and blow-dried air wasn't something she needed where she lived. She was annoyed by things

Western, even by the seat cushions on the train, but especially by her sister, for whose sake she was sitting in this crowded train in the first place. Waldtraut, with her summer sandals and French braid from the hairstyle magazine, would always have felt at home here. Katharina was not angry because Waldtraut had turned her back on her country and identity; to each her own, she said to Eli, but the questions that she as aunt had to answer and ask herself – those weren't something she could accept so easily. What kind of mother leaves her child behind? And why had Waldtraut parked the church's truck on the bank of the Elbe and left her suitcases inside?

Katharina remembered that an officer of the *Volkspolizei* had told her a few days after her sister disappeared that she should just take things slow, as they come. This man often ate at her snack bar after the early shift, always an eel roll with horseradish on the side. He was also the one who, shortly after taking the missing persons report, had had to relay the message that the truck had been found on the bank of the Elbe, but there was no trace of Waldtraut.

“Take things slowly, thinking too fast will just disturb your rhythm,” he said, dipping the tip of his roll as evenly as possible into the horseradish sauce. But for Katharina, things were sooner the other way around: the slower she thought, the more she felt out of sync. She

preferred to listen to the men at the regulars' table, who had much more lively hypotheses about where Waldtraut was than she did, and then let her feelings lead. On days when she couldn't make peace with what had happened, she believed Martin's explanation, according to which her sister, now involved with the former parish priest, was trying to forget her old life.

In weak moments, she blamed her mother's family for Waldtraut's disappearance; for generations, they had problems with water. Wading into the water was a defect in the Pomeranian line of the family, just like the tendency toward club feet on her father's Havelland side. A great aunt on her mother's side never returned from a spa week on the Bay of Lübeck. Fishermen retrieved her body from the water near Scharbeutz. This was passed down in Struwe family folklore as a tragic event caused by the undercurrents that arose from the east wind. Whenever Katharina's mother spoke of her great aunt's death, she also told of this great aunt's brother, recounting in the same breath how the naval ensign who had survived the Battle of the Skagerrak in World War I went overboard in fair weather on the trip back to Wilhelmshaven. He was an outstanding swimmer, but the sea just wouldn't cough him up.

In the decades that followed, there had been a series of accidents in which water played a prominent role. First, when Katharina's mother

was no longer a Struwe, but had long since taken up residence in western Brandenburg, the skates of a distant cousin had broken through the ice on the Schmollensee. The place where the ice gave way beneath her skate blades was too shallow for her to drown, but after she was rescued, she got such a bad lung infection that she died just a few days later. After this unfortunate incident, volunteers from the air defense division stationed in Pudagla placed warning signs on riverbanks across the entire county, and all of the Struwes were especially careful to keep the younger members of the family away from bodies of water, something that was difficult to enforce in the Achterland.

Katharina also saw the ghastly soul of the Baltic Sea in these tragic incidents. It was unnaturally fond of bringing down those relatives who had succumbed to the hardships of coastal life. The sea sloshed over their minds and salted them from the inside. They became volatile and agitated, quick-tempered and disoriented. The great aunt had always been a strange woman and had never bothered with grief; the ensign fell victim to his battle fatigue. And as for the death of the distant cousin, Katharina suspected an unfavorable mixture of poor weather conditions and the boredom that was widespread in the Achterland. Waldtraut was cut from the same cloth as the great aunt, her temperament was

somewhat mercurial. Katharina would not have been surprised if her sister had driven to the banks of the Elbe to dive into it.

The conductor's dialect crackled through the loudspeakers by Katharina's head. His voice could not hide the fact that the train was traveling across foreign soil. He seemed to be reading each place name three times from a sheet before he finally understood where the railcars were headed. In the compartment, the passengers exchanged glances and giggled behind their hands.

On the day after the Wall fell, the special announcements and music that Katharina's mother found so scandalous poured from the loudspeakers. Katharina didn't dare to turn on the TV and opened her fish stall earlier than usual. She was pleased to see the locals, who placed their orders without commenting on the previous day's events. In their town, nobody was dancing into an allegedly better era, and nobody got into the car so that the Westerners could put "pity pennies" into their pockets at the border. Only Eli sat in the living room, upright in her armchair, clutching the remote control. When Katharina entered the room, the tubes in the TV popped and crackled.

"Something's happening," said Eli, trying to sound contrite.

That Friday, they convened an emergency session in the Bandauer. The men, who were usually so talkative, sat sheepishly with their mugs, taking two shots for every beer. Quiet hung over the town, a quiet such as Katharina had never heard before. The machines in the concrete plant ground to a halt, and Martin doubted that they would ever resume their old rhythm again. Cobbler Küstrin discussed Honecker's state of health with Hardware-Hiller, and Comrade Bergmann announced that he would quit his post if the transport police, as rumored, were going to be transferred directly to the West German Border Police.

Only Pilly didn't take note of the adults' worries; she was playing dice with Mr. Bandau and Mr. Brunig at the bar. A bit too smart for a ten-year-old, Brandau remarked, and when he once again put his coins on the wrong number before rolling, she giggled "bad luck!"

Meanwhile, the adults were hoping that some dice still hadn't been cast and that a solution might be found in the *Politbüro*.

"I'd rather have an ape as my leader than a pear," said Brunig, and Bandau was annoyed that they would be driven from one questionable alliance to another. Even during the summer, he had talked about "frustration with the Warsaw Pact" and opined that the GDR should not let itself be defined solely by Soviet proclamations.



“The Russians are shitting on their own front doorstep,” he murmured, putting his coin in the right place for a change.

Katharina made herself as small as she could when a woman sat down across from her at the unpronounceable stop in Schandelah. The sunbeams falling through the window illuminated the short blond haircut that Katharina had seen the English Crown Princess wearing on TV and on every second woman on the train who was from “over there.” The woman’s pink lips closed around the garish skin of a type of apple that they were displaying in the new supermarket but that no one in town wanted to buy. Sometimes, Katharina missed the musty smell that she remembered from the apple orchards of her childhood. When it got cooler at night, an aroma would rise from the fallen fruit on the ground, drifting through the branches where worm-laden fruit trembled in the first autumn breeze. When the blossoms fell off in the early summer, Katharina left footprints in them as if through snowdrifts, and when, after her birthday in August, the entire harvest appeared in the crowns of the trees, it was easy for her to say which apple would ripen fastest. She almost always won the bets against Waldtraut.

When Katharina moved into the “Witches’ Garden” with Eli, there was a lot of talk in town about the withered spinsters who hadn’t

found anyone and who were therefore a good match for one another. She almost left but the scent of the fruit trees near the snack bar held her back. It brought back all the forgotten memories of her mother's native soil. Katharina simply didn't thrive in the mudflats. Unlike her sister, from the very beginning Katharina had not been able to understand the sea, and no year passed after their move to the Achterland that she didn't miss the Havelland. The sun could set dramatically behind the cliffs, turning the surf into liquid amber, but the sea could not drive the apple orchards out of Katharina's head.

“We don't even own the toilet seat we're sitting on,” said Katharina's father, when the orchards, farm, and store, and even the spare tires that had been repaired a hundred times, the ones that were hanging on the wall of the garage, were handed over to the collective; after that, he got quieter and quieter.

“That's not right,” he mumbled while he was looking for the error in the constitution or writing letters, putting the letters in envelopes, and taking them to the post office. It was not right that there were never any responses to his letters and that his parents' newspaper-wrapped porcelain had to be moved in apple crates to his in-laws' bungalow in Trassenheide. Katharina's mother cried a lot that day.

“Anyone who yells at the mountains shouldn’t be surprised by an echo,” she whispered to Katharina, labeling the crates with her pencil. She did that with gusto, as if she wanted to get it over with.

Whatever it was that forced her father to leave the Havelland was as much of a gut punch as the seeds of the sweet lupine that he was supposed to tend from then on. Nobody dared to ask whether he was following a command from above or being punished for his letters of complaint. If before other people had worked for her father, now he was the one who had to slave away. Instead of apples, he put yellow beans on the table; when roasted, they tasted like nuts and when raw, like unripe peas. First, he lost his appetite for the savory, then for the sweet, something that caused everyone to worry; and later on, his stomachaches were so bad that he would double over even when he bent down to put his work boots on. Katharina believed he was bent from hard labor in the fields, even from the place itself: “Krummin” – “Bentville.” For the name alone suggested that you had to bend here. She hated the swampy salt marshes and the aggressive sea birds that nested there. The variable weather. The crosswinds. The murmuring of the sea, which everyone else in the family found so comforting, made her nervous and restless.

“So just go for a walk in the forest!” moaned Waldtraut every time Katharina complained about the lack of apple trees and life on the Wieck in general. But a marsh like that wasn’t a real forest.

While Waldtraut whiled away her youth on trysts in the Zinnowitz House of Culture, the bend in the middle of her father’s body became inexorably more pronounced. He lay on his side, folded in on himself in her parents’ bed and left the bed only if somebody had a birthday or if his in-laws came to visit. Katharina’s mother worked in the *Red October* holiday home, cleaning and at the reception desk; she didn’t dare to go into the bedroom after work.

When Waldtraut brought her steady boyfriend Karl home for the first time, the tension in her father’s body released in a spurt of blood on the tablecloth. It sprayed the curtains, the glass cover of the ceiling lamp, and the leaves of the rubber tree. The splatters mixed with the gravy, spattered across the Thuringian dumplings, and Karl’s jacket. After that, things went fast. Father traveled back to the Havelland in a box and was finally returned to the land to which he belonged. Years later, the wallpaper next to the dining table still bore reminders of this incident, which caused Waldtraut heartache and gave Katharina nightmares. Karl never came to dinner again, and Katharina’s mother never served dumplings with gravy again; nor did she manage to

redecorate the living room walls. Instead, she drove a nail into the spot of blood on the wallpaper, and every time someone came for coffee, she hung an oil painting over it. An idyllic Brandenburg landscape with pines beside a lake, incongruous with the gulls' cries in front of the house.

Making her way from the train station to the shoe store, Katharina felt like a freshwater fish that had accidentally swum into the open sea. She asked herself what motivated people to voluntarily fight their way through a pedestrian zone like this one. Everyone walked with their elbows out and rubbed the wrong way against other people with each step. Music blasted from the stores, also from the store where – luckily – Pilly's sneakers were displayed right next to the entrance. Before her birthday, Pilly had spent days browsing the catalogue, talking about nothing except the light-up soles of these shoes, which, like so many other things, were not for sale in their town.

Sometimes Katharina found it eerie how many of Waldtraut's weaknesses Pilly had inherited and just how much she resembled her mother. Both of them had broad Havelland features, bulbous noses, and sharp teeth. Yet her niece was as little interested in boys as Katharina had been at the same age; and there was that gentleness, something that

no one else in the family possessed, and even Katharina herself didn't know where it came from. The same was true of Pilly's red hair, a riddle that only Waldtraut could solve.

At Bandauer's, Martin regularly implied after a few beers that he didn't believe he was the father. Waldtraut's dresses had hardly hung in the closet next to his shirts for three weeks before all of her clothes were becoming too tight. Katharina didn't have any arguments to counter her brother-in-law's doubts, and in moments like these, she even felt some pity for him. Martin was not the first man in Waldtraut's history to whom she had nothing to say. Her sister got the less-cute name, but better genes, with her dark brown hair and pale eyes. After the traumatized Karl there was a disappointed Friedrich, then a betrayed Janko, and after Janko many others whom Katharina didn't take seriously enough to learn their names. She only remembered a Ralf, for whom Waldtraut did not weep. When he left, he gave her a black eye and a train ticket back to the *Fischerhaus*. Like bleached-out flotsam, Waldtraut suddenly appeared at the front door with two suitcases and cried so loud into her shoulder that Katharina said nothing about the luggage. Before Martin there was Peter, who got Waldtraut the job at the cemetery flower shop and who had reddish hair. So, Katharina could not blame Martin for having doubts.

The shelves were filled with shoes for every occasion. Athletic shoes, hiking and beach vacation shoes, black shoes for funerals, white ones for weddings, and comfortable ones for wearing at home. Dancing shoes, rubber and leather boots, sandals with straps like the ones Waldtraut wore. Katharina hastily shoved the shoebox under her arm and walked to the post office deep in thought. She didn't want to think about her sister, and certainly not about the drops of blood on the wallpaper behind the painting in her parents' house in Krummin. Not about the stinking heaps of foamy algae that piled up on the seashore after a storm, and not about her brother-in-law's woes. Instead, she tried to imagine her father's scratchy hands, how they lifted one apple crate after another, letting the fruit fall into the press. The taste of the Spartan and Kalco varieties. You could only eat the first kind in November; the other one ripened right after her birthday in September. Spartan was almost purple hanging from the branches, and its juice was so sweet that it made your teeth ache. The Kalco had more acid and was a true Snow-White apple. Its peel was blood red where the sun struck it, but it stayed yellow in the shade. She wanted to remember the row of fruit-pickers beneath the spare tires in the garage. Like an army of tin soldiers, they

stood tenaciously until their next deployment; shoulder to shoulder, covered in spider webs like cotton candy at spring festivals.

At the post office window, Katharina carefully wrapped the shoebox in brown paper and wrote Pilly's address on the top. She tried to imitate Waldtraut's curvy handwriting, something she got better at each year. Her inborn gentleness didn't allow her to see anyone in a completely bad light or to wipe away her niece's childhood in any way, as the Baltic Sea had her own so many years ago.