Stefan Cordes

Billie: To Heaven on Wild Horses

[BILLIE »Ich fliege Himmel an mit ungezähmten Pferden«]

Outline + Sample Translation

Novel

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A stunning debut novel about the life of a wild young poet during the Thirty Years' War who speaks to us as if she were alive today

I felt it all: fear, rage, the irresistible urge to fight. Not with swords and pistols, but with my voice, which I had learnt to use like a sword, and like a heart that never froze during the winter of war…

Pomerania is at war. Wallenstein's men have made themselves comfortable in mayor Schwarz's house in Greifswald. Nothing is safe from them, least of all his three adolescent daughters. Billie, the youngest, protests that she wants a proper education just like her brothers. Billie is wild, a rebel: she fights with the pen, writes poems to counter the hate directed towards her as a woman, but also beautiful sonnets about her love for another woman. Poetry is her way of standing up to the terror of the Thirty Years' War, the horrors of the witch hunts, and the oppression of women.

• For fans of Lauren Groff's "Matrix", Daniel Kehlmann's "Tyll", Rivka Galchen's "Everyone Knows Your Mother Is a Witch" and Maggie O'Farrell's "The Marriage Portrait"

Stefan Cordes, born in Brussels in 1969, studied journalism, history of art and philosophy and spent many years working as a TV format developer, creative director and producer. "Billie" is his debut novel, and he wrote it in part for his two daughters, whose freedoms must never be infringed.

Sample Translation

By Alexandra Roesch

1

We had led a quiet life. The seasons had alternated; we had grown taller and older without even noticing. I was no longer a child, though not much else had changed. I had taught myself to read and loved roaming through the library, tracing the book spines with my fingertips. I would select a book from the shelf, imagine what it might be about and invent stories of queens and knights, love and betrayal, until I finally pulled the book out and opened it. Sometimes it was just a dull work on law, but sometimes it was something like this: a beautiful princess grew up in Burgundy, more beautiful than anyone else in the world. Her name was Kriemhild. She wanted no husband because love brings so much suffering, until Siegfried wooed her – Siegfried, this haughty hero, who had stripped Brünhild of her power, the proud queen of the Ice Land, who had ruled over the white cold with magical powers until He, notorious Siegfried, had arrived.

I learned to read Latin. My brother Christian recommended I do so and helped me. That's how I discovered the heroic epics of Homer, the odes of Horace, the wisdom of Virgil, and of course, Ovid, time and again, Ovid's Metamorphoses. I longed to transform myself, though I couldn't say into what. I would have loved to write like Ovid, but what I knew, I knew from books, and I had done no heroic deeds, experienced no adventures. No god ever appeared in our kitchen, not even a demigod. I snipped beans and sneaked off to the library when no one was paying attention. The hours passed like clouds, the days like ships on the horizon. A foal was born, geese were slaughtered, there was a surplus of turnips, then turnips became scarce, carrots were nowhere to be found, a horse went lame, a neighbour died. Regina would marry one day, then Emerentia, and lastly, me. I, too, would marry one day and only then, Emerentia claimed, would our lives change, because we would move into another house, become the wives of men, and have children. All this was as unimaginable to me as growing a beard. Things changed so slowly that I hardly noticed. Whenever anyone said: 'When you are a mother yourself, Billie, you will understand better,' I never looked back, only forward. 'If you don't brush your hair with a hundred strokes a day, no man will look at you.' I pictured myself walking through the streets of Greifswald with tangled hair and grown men turning up their noses, but it only made me laugh, not brush my hair.

So the years had passed, at a leisurely pace, like a very old woman. Never would I have suspected that the world could move faster, that so many things could happen at once, taking my breath away. But that is what happened on the day I woke to the thunder of cannons.

Everything shattered.

2

In November 1618, three years before my birth, a massive comet had appeared in the sky. With its glowing tail, it silently ploughed its path through the starlit night sky, and the people in Pomerania stepped out of their houses and looked up in horror.

Some crossed themselves, others looked away in fear. A boy from the village of Dargelin, so I imagined many years later, stepped barefoot out of a small house, froze at the sight of the glowing dragon and forgot the biting cold of the night.

'What does it mean?' he asked his mother, who had stepped up behind him.

He heard the fear in her voice, a fear that was greater than the dread of hunger or the shock of thunder, a fear that settled over them like a giant beast, and that seemed to fall silent like the snow on the bare fields before Dargelin's huts: 'God will punish us.'

A girl came out of the house behind them, swaying sleepily. She might have been five years old, no older, so I imagined it, and she was called Anna. Having been deeply asleep, she didn't notice the fear that hung over the houses of Dargelin like a heavy fog. She pressed herself against her mother's hip and asked with a yawn: 'Punish us for what?'. And only when the mother laid her icy hand over Anna's tired eyes was the girl so shocked by the fear that the air froze in her throat.

The comet blazed bright like a torch, so bright that it could be seen even during daytime: something big and evil was in the air!

This comet, it was said, heralded blood and horror, a terrible war. And a war came. A war as vast and bloody as the world had never seen. A war as merciless as if hell had opened its greedy jaws to devour us. I dreamed of bloodthirsty cuirassiers fighting silently against soulless pikemen in the smoke of the cannon shots, their movements so slow that their mouths opened into silent screams like the blossoms of evening primroses. I saw smoking pistols that spat bullets into the skulls of young soldiers, glowing spears thrust into the bodies of raging fighters and steaming horses. I dreamed of horsemen who fell to the ground in their clattering armour, to sleep forever in the dirt, far from their mothers and sisters. But I couldn't hear the clattering; instead, I felt it, because I was trembling. I woke up trembling, and it took a while before I finally realised that it must have been a dream, for I lay in bed in my attic room.

It was only later that I found out it wasn't a dream: a vast army was advancing from the south to subdue us.

I pushed the window open and, as the cold morning air enveloped me, I saw black smoke in the sky beyond the rooftops of Greifswald. The wind carried cries of terror to my window, along with a deep thundering sound.

On the horizon, as I imagined later, a dazzling chestnut horse appeared, stepping out of the mist onto the frost-hardened hill in front of the village of Dargelin. And the man riding the horse, wearing armour but no helmet, bore the name Bernstein. Colonel Vratzislav Bernstein. The cold turned his breath into white vapour, and the breath of his snorting horse was a huge cloud. Behind him, cutting through the grey mist like a gigantic

ghost ship, was the black army of the underworld, quivering riders, hungry foot-soldiers, with fire and brimstone spewing from their mouths, and they all craved our flesh and blood.

3

I had seen the smoke, heard the thundering and then forgotten it again. I had no idea what was happening in Dargelin, not far from our house in Greifswald. I ran downstairs into the kitchen, where Els was chopping a plucked chicken into pieces with a cleaver, and Ide was slicing onions, tears streaming down her cheeks.

I swiped an apple, but Els, our old cook, called out: 'I saw that, Billie.'

'You saw nothing, Els,' I called back. 'Are you crying because you are lovesick, Ide?'

But Ide was as cheerful as ever; I had never known her to be anything else. How I admired her hair, yellow as wheat, while mine was brown like old hazelnuts.

'A man certainly won't make me cry,' Ide said, laughing and crying, 'only onions can do that.'

I bit into the apple - it was juicy and sweet - and then ran out of the kitchen, where Coke blocked my way. Our dog was as black as a moonless night, as black and beautiful as a fine horse. The agitated voices of my father and my older brothers, Christian and Joachim, reached my ears from the hallway.

'How could our Duke betray us to the Catholics?' Joachim shouted.

'We have neither enough money nor enough soldiers to stand up to Wallenstein,' my father said. 'He is leading a huge army of forty thousand men to Pomerania!'

Suddenly the smoke was back in the morning sky, and the thundering rumbled in my ears. I imagined a vast army, forty thousand men! How many people lived in Greifswald? Five thousand? Six thousand?

'Our Duke has allowed the Catholics to occupy our city,' Joachim said. 'How could he do that to us? We are Protestants.'

'You certainly don't need to remind me of my faith,' my father said. 'Our Duke had no choice.'

I tried to imagine our Duke, I couldn't remember his name, standing alone against this vast army, small, stout, with his hand raised to stop the soldiers.

'The people are defying his order in Stralsund,' Joachim said.

Bogislaw. I remembered again, he meant our Duke, Bogislaw the Fourteenth, that was his name. I had never heard of the other thirteen Bogislaws.

Our father ran down the steps, shouting: 'There are Swedish troops in Stralsund to support them. Not here!'

'Let us call the Swedes,' Joachim said. 'They are Protestants like us. They will protect us from the Catholics.'

'Father,' I said. 'I saw smoke in the south!'

He passed by me. Christian followed.

'Ride south, Christian,' my father ordered, 'see if they have already reached Dargelin, because if they have, they will be upon us tomorrow.'

4

The people who lived in Dargelin ran around in terror, trying first to hide their children, then their livestock, some hiding the livestock first. Others knew it was pointless to hide the animals but not the children, not themselves.

I thought of Melchior, the little boy from Dargelin, whom I knew. I imagined him running breathlessly through the village until he reached the bell and rang it, harder than anyone had ever rung the village bell before. He stared at the army, moving towards them like an evil enchanted forest, ready to engulf them.

'The devil is coming to get us!' he screamed. 'The devil is coming!

Only when Melchior saw his mother in the chaos of men, cows, women, children, goats and dogs, his mother dragging his sister Frodi, who was only four, behind her like a stubborn little sheep, did he stop ringing the bell and jumped down to run after them. His mother, who carried a small sack, dragged Frodi behind her so fast that the girl fell. She tugged Frodi back to her feet and pulled her into the stable, where she hid the small sack beneath the straw. When Melchior came into the stable shouting that she had to give the money to the soldiers to stay alive, she stopped digging, turned to him and said quite calmly, as if she were reciting a prayer: 'Melchior, listen to me. Hold your sister's hand tightly. Go north with her, as far as you can. Do not look back. Never look back!'

But Melchior shook his head.

'No, Mother,' he cried in fright, 'we have to stay with you.'

Then Frodi began to cry, as I imagined it later, when Christian came back half-dead and told me everything, and when I had understood that it wasn't just words, that all this had truly happened, I felt ashamed because I hadn't understood before – I had understood but not comprehended - and I had forgotten everything when Christian and our father had left the house and I had run up the stairs past Joachim.

5

When I entered the library, my brother Georg raised his head angrily, looking at me with a serious expression, acting serious, as he always did when the tutor was teaching him.

'Get out, Billie,' Georg snapped at me, even though he was a year younger than me. 'Girls have no place studying.'

Georg and his gauche teacher Christoph Hagen, who was old, thirty, I guessed, seemed to me like little boys playing, like two surprised boys playing with their toy soldiers.

'Oh really? Says who?' I replied.

That was a new response. 'Oh really? Says who?' was something I had never said before when Georg claimed that girls had no place studying.

'Who?' My brother looked at his teacher who lowered his gaze; the poor man wanted nothing to do with our quarrel. 'God, of course!' Georg exclaimed.

The teacher looked at him doubtfully. Georg's response was not bad, but it wouldn't win the day.

'Do you really believe, Georg Schwarz,' I said, 'that God would say something so stupid?'

I said that even though I knew that the teacher wouldn't like it, and because he gave me an admonishing look (he had to look at me, that was the least he could do, given his job) I didn't even look at him.

'The professors don't allow girls into their universities because they're afraid they might outshine the boys,' I explained, 'and they would.'

Georg laughed derisively. 'Oh, sure! But if you girls are so clever, why did God put us men in charge? "The husband is the head of the wife!" Paul's letter to the Ephesians.'

'Maybe Paul was having an off day.'

Of course the teacher had to intervene, but all he said was: 'Billie! Watch your blasphemous tongue!' and I was startled because he called me Billie, not Sibylla. Only those who lived in our house called me Billie, and he didn't, God forbid! Ide claimed he was in love with me, which was why I didn't like to look at him.

I picked up the book that lay open in front of Georg and read the title: 'Ovid. *Metamorphoseon libri*,' and said: 'Well, go on, read, and prove to me that only you boys are made for studying.'

As haughtily as he could – and he truly could look as haughty as the noble lords and ladies – he took the book from my hand, opened it and read: *'Pronaque cum spectent animalia cetera terram, os homini sublime dedit caelumque videre.'*

Pleased to be a little taller than I, he proudly raised his eyebrows, just as the tutor always did.

I said: 'Yes, everyone knows that you can read, but do you have the slightest idea what the words mean?'

Georg hissed; he hesitated. I knew that he was angry because I had lured him into a trap. He stared at the book, squinting like Els did when she counted out the money for the market into Ide's hand, and gave a slight head shake: 'Um, the animals bow … so, when, um, when the animals see the rest of the earth … or the remaining animals bow and see the earth … or something like that. And the man gave to see … what? *Dedit caelumque* … um, the cellar?'

He looked at the tutor, who kept his eyes down as if we didn't exist, but his face was as red as a ripe apple.

'The man is to go into the cellar?' I cried. 'This Ovid is funny!'

'*Caelum*,' the tutor said. '*Caelum:* the sky!'

I took the book from Georg's hand and read, just as Emerentia came into the library. Emi, my radiantly beautiful sister, was four years older than me and couldn't read at all. My

words flowed effortlessly; after all, I had read Ovid three times already and loved his Metamorphoses.

'And while the other animals look downwards at the ground, he gave human beings an upturned aspect, commanding them to look towards the skies, and, upright, raise their faces towards the stars.'

Emerentia laughed approvingly, which made Georg even angrier: 'It's not: human beings! *Homini:* the men. You misread it on purpose.'

'The word for man is *vir,*' I said, as the tutor's hesitant voice interjected: 'Where did you learn to translate from Latin, Sibylla?'

'Maybe I taught myself?'

I didn't reveal that Christian had helped me.

I winked at Emi, and she smiled back conspiratorially. Georg, however, was not finished yet. 'Do you think that the Creator wanted girls to look up at the stars? If that had been his intention, there would be female astronomers, but there aren't any. Not a single one! Girls should lower their gaze and look at the earth like animals do because that's the floor they have to scrub!'

'Yes, you frog!' I shouted.

Then my eldest sister Regina came into the library with tear-stained eyes, saying that our mother had said I should go to the kitchen to help Els. Georg grinned maliciously and, as haughtily as he could, said: 'There you go! Just as I said!'

Triumphantly, he pulled the book out of my hand. I stormed out angrily, past Regina, whose cheeks were red and damp. She smelled like a cupboard that hadn't been aired.

6

Regina was twenty but cried often; perhaps things get heavy when you are twenty. The day before, I had heard her crying in her room. Our mother was with her; Regina lay on the bed.

'Why are you crying again, Regina?' mother asked.

Regina sighed, sniffled and wiped away her tears.

She was crying, she explained, because Julius Riems, who had travelled to Stettin, might be unable to return to Greifswald now.

I didn't know why Julius Reims couldn't return to Greifswald; I didn't even know who Julius Reims was, but of course my mother knew exactly who he was: 'Julius Reims' business is going badly, father says, and he didn't dance with you even once at the ball, so what are you waiting for?'

Regina protested, saying he had looked at her, looked at her, yes indeed! But mother hissed scornfully, truly scornfully and angrily before leaving the room. 'You are not sixteen any more, Regina. If you carry on like this, soon no one will look at you. Where is Billie? She needs to help out in the kitchen, hard times lie ahead.'

I hadn't known about hard times, but then, as I stormed out of the library past Regina, I remembered: the smoke, the thunder, forty thousand soldiers, Dargelin, and when

I came down into the kitchen, where Els was stirring the big pot and Ide was setting down the basket of groceries from the market, it wouldn't be long before I saw with my own eyes what had happened; before I saw, understood and comprehended.

'They're buying at the market as if there's no tomorrow!' Ide said.

'What's happened?' I asked.

Had no one told me yet, really?

'No, no, what is it? Oh Coke, you thieving hellhound,' I cried, because Coke had stolen an egg from the basket. I ran after him, laughing, into the yard, where I saw my brother. Bent over and covered in blood, he staggered towards me, collapsing on his knees.

'We must close the gates!' he whispered.

7

My brother Christian knew a girl in Dargelin, Anna, no longer a girl now, a young woman, but he had known her when he was still a boy and I was very small. He took me with him to the market where she sold her father's vegetables. Her father was a fractious farmer whom people distrusted. Anna had eyes that shimmered like pebbles in a spring brook, and two dimples framed her mouth like a divided heart when she smiled. This had enchanted him.

They had both seen the comet when they were children. She in Dargelin, Christian at home in Greifswald. On the first night it appeared, Anna's mother had covered her eyes with her hand, and our mother had done the same for Christian. He believed his fate was thereby linked with Anna's: perhaps it was.

He had spurred Jonion, his beautiful black horse, and galloped south down the country road to Dargelin, where I had seen the smoke and heard the thunder. Anna lived there, with her divided heart and two children to whom she had given birth while still young. Whether one of them was Christian's, maybe both, no one knew.

I imagined Anna, not just her, but all the country girls from Dargelin, their golden skin in autumn before the cold came, the calluses on their dark hands, the earth that remained under their nails like black crescents from digging potatoes. There was dust in their tied-up hair, nostrils and ears. Cold clay between their toes, dry clay on their dancing feet, crumbling clay on their pretty ankles, clay in the fur of their goats, in the fur of their dogs, the clay of their huts, the clay on the graves of their ancestors, soon everything would be earth.

Christian reined in his horse and saw the huts of Dargelin, which had fallen to the ground like dice from a cup, and in front of it the vast army. The soldiers were still, as if frozen, hope whispered in his ear. Frozen to death on the wide plains of Pomerania. But above them rose clouds of smoke from the hellfires in their bodies. The wind swept coldly from the sea across the land and blew into their soulless faces, but they did not freeze. They would never freeze as long as the war stoked the embers within them.

Then a merciless storm swept over the village of Dargelin. In the gunpowder haze, Christian saw the girl, her eyes two pebbles sinking in the water. He spurred his horse,

jumped down and tried to save her. A sabre slashed his shoulder. Christian staggered against a horse, and the man who sat on it and kicked him away was Lieutenant Colonel Guitzardo. Christian stumbled towards Guitzardo and shouted: 'Sir, these are peaceful farmers, they till the land, tend the livestock. Order your soldiers to spare these people.'

Melchior ran out of the burning stable, pulling Frodi behind him. Then he recognised him: 'Christian! Christian, we're coming!'

Gunsmoke enveloped him and Melchior fell to the ground. Above him on his horse, the smoking pistol in his hand, Guitzardo turned towards Christian and raised his eyebrows. Christian hurled himself at him, feeling no fear, wanting to drag him off his horse. Guitzardo raised his pistol and fired.

8

Finally, a knock at the front door. I ran down the stairs to the hallway, where Ide was gathering up the silver candlesticks to hide them in case there was looting. Els emerged from the kitchen: 'Not all of them, Ide. The Catholics will notice. Leave two or three; let the heretics take those.'

Another knock at the door.

'I'm coming!' I called.

Swiftly, I slid back the bolt and opened the door a crack. I got a fright. Outside stood a man with a brown beard, his face covered with warts as large as broad beans, the skin beneath resembled old cauliflower.

'Julius van den Spiegel, you called for me.'

I pulled the door open, allowing him entry, staring at his old leather bag made of patched cowhide, rather than at his face. He read my mind. 'You'll have to get used to it. Where is he?'

'Upstairs.'

'What are we waiting for?'

'Come this way.'

I ran up the stairs and van den Spiegel followed.

Christian's eyes were closed; cold sweat covered his pale face. The sheets were stained with blood and his shirt was unbuttoned, revealing the devastation caused by the bullet that had torn through his abdomen.

Van den Spiegel looked at him in confusion. 'I was told it was a painful tooth!'

'Not a tooth,' I said, 'a bullet from a pistol that is going to kill him.'

Van den Spiegel shook his head and turned towards the door: 'Call me when you have toothache. Teeth, bloodletting, cupping, enemas, that's my business. Goodbye!'

'I'll pay double,' I said.

'Double what?'

He was already in the hallway.

'Double what a tooth costs.'

'A bullet in the abdomen is not a tooth that you can pull out with pliers.'

'Triple.'

'Best pray for your brother if you're that attached to your money.'

'Five teeth.'

'Agreed.'

Van den Spiegel placed his bag next to the bed and put his hand on Christian's forehead.

'Have you ever cut a bullet out of a human body before?'

'It was a long time ago. A man shot at a boy. I pulled the bullet from his lung. The boy still died.'

9

With trembling hands, van den Spiegel laid out hooks, scissors, scalpels, knives and saws on the table. He dipped his fingers into the bowl of water, withdrawing them. 'It's not hot!'

Regina looked at him uncertainly. 'By the time I bring it upstairs, it's cooled down.'

'Wine?' van den Spiegel grumbled. Regina handed him the jug and a glass. He took the jug and drank from it.

'One of you should stay here.'

He looked expressionlessly at Christian's wound, then at our faces. Regina lowered her gaze.

'I'll stay,' I said.

'Bring more water,' he said to Regina. 'Hot water!'

She nodded, left the room and closed the door. Van den Spiegel handed me the jug. I hesitated, took it, drank the wine and handed him back the jug.

'It steadies the hands,' he remarked, handing me a wooden bite stick marked with deep tooth imprints.

'Will he survive?' I whispered.

'Perhaps. If he wants to live.'

'Yes, he wants to, or else he wouldn't have come back.'

I stroked Christian's forehead. He opened his eyes, squinted and groaned, unable to bear the light. Van der Spiegel took another sip of wine, grabbed a scalpel, his hands still trembling. 'Ready?'

I held the bite stick to Christian's lips. He opened his mouth, I put the stick in and he bit down on it.

'Think of the beautiful things in life, lad,' van der Spiegel said.

He exposed the wound and inserted the pliers. Christian arched up, biting down on the stick, looking into my eyes, holding still, just snorting wildly through his nostrils. His face was deathly pale. Beads of sweat broke out all over him and he began to drown in sweat. I prayed silently as van der Spiegel burrowed around in Christian's abdomen, while more and

more blood oozed out. Van den Spiegel shook his head and pulled the small pliers out. Christian groaned.

'It's no use, I can't do it,' said van der Spiegel.

'Why not?'

'I can't do it.'

I stared at him. 'You tried it before, even if you weren't able to save the boy.'

Van den Spiegel shook his head. 'He was my son.'

He reached for the jug, standing lost in the room for a moment.

'Please try,' I said.

He drank, sat down on the bed beside Christian, and eventually picked up the small bloody pliers again and pushed them into the abdomen. Finally, he slowly pulled the pliers out.

'There is the beast,' he said, exhausted.

He was mistaken. He had pulled out the bullet that was supposed to kill my brother. But he hadn't defeated the beast.

10

I was tired, desperate to sleep deeply, deeply and for a long time, then to wake up and find out that nothing had happened, to run downstairs to the kitchen, steal an apple, to see Ide, who laughed while crying over the onions, Coke, who was swiping an egg, Christian, who was whistling a tune. Emi with colourful ribbons braided in her hair, steaming chicken broth, parsley, the simple clucking of the chickens in the yard like every morning.

I didn't sleep. I listened into the night.

They attacked us at dawn.

Bernstein had his men penetrate all the city gates at the same time. Shamefully, the gatekeepers stepped aside. Our Duke, Bogislaw the Fourteenth, had handed our Protestant city to the Catholics and no one resisted, and so their war drums echoed through deserted streets, along with the beat of iron hooves, the clatter of armour.

I watched the men from the boy's room. Christian groaned in his sleep. I went downstairs to fetch him soup. I could hear my father from my parents' bedroom.

'I have to go to the town hall,' he said, his face expressionless.

The large wall mirror was opened like a door and behind it lay a small chamber with cabinets in which valuable silver bowls gleamed. Dutch porcelain, jewellery boxes, amber, Spanish glass. Mother placed the large ivory chess set inside, then said: 'I'm frightened. What will they do to us?'

Father looked at her without saying a word. I slipped off down the stairs to the kitchen and thought about what they would do to us.

Els gathered up the gold spoons in the kitchen, placed them in a box and locked it.

'Christian needs soup,' I said.

Els didn't look up. 'Right away, Billie.'

Christian was awake when I brought him the soup. He listened to the noise from the street, the drums, hoofbeats, shouting.

'There are so many,' I said.

'There will be more, Billie.'

'But where will all the men sleep?'

'In our beds, where do you think? They are now the masters of this city.'

So they would live in our houses, sleep in our beds, sit at our tables, reach for our books, devour our supplies, slaughter our animals, steal our money. But if they were now the masters of our city, then what were we? Could they do what they wanted with us? Would no one come to protect us from them? To save us? It was all so simple, so terribly simple.

11

When I turned ten, Christian gave me a gift, an incredible gift, a little book, not like the ones to be found in the library, but a magical book, nothing written on it, the cover light brown, each page untouched, like the beach after winter over which no one had walked yet.

At first I thought the book would fill with words one night by invisible hand. It didn't; it remained empty. Quietly, I turned page after page, one hundred and forty-four lonely beaches, each one as beautiful as the other. One hundred and forty-four, Christian had said, was a magical number, it meant that you could look into the most hidden corners of the soul and be protected by angels. Only Christian could say such incredible things, and when he saw that I still didn't understand the magical book, that I was fascinated, but did not understand, then he said I could fill it with my own words, it was my book. It took my breath away, and my heart pounded in my chest. I was gripped by terror, as if a dark messenger in the deepest night were knocking on the door, while I lay in bed anxiously, too scared to open.

Christian had sailed home from a great journey to Stockholm with the light brown book in his bag and a red beard. He cut off the beard and the book stayed empty. For a long time I hid it deep inside the cupboard, but in truth I was hiding from the book. I was so afraid of putting a word or even just a letter on the first page, or setting foot on the sand and forever destroying its silent, unspoilt state. Hidden in the darkness, it remained as it was; it didn't change. I didn't change. I remained what I was until the war came, and then I knew it was time.

I raised the book to the light, took a quill, dipped it in ink, and began my book of transformations.

