Sabrina Janesch

The Cat Hills

Translation: Katy Derbyshire

Grandfather said he'd sensed the curse from far off. It was a barely perceptible foul smell, he said, hovering above the soil and settling over anyone who set foot there.
The others hadn't felt it until they'd let them out of the wagons. But by then, Grandfather said, once the men had expressed their surprise about it and the unnaturally sharp-edged shadows of the hills, it had been too late.
There was no station at the place where the farmers had to get out of the wagons, just a heap of coal. Planted in it was a sign with blue enamel lettering: *Obernigk*. *Oborniki*, called the Russian soldiers on the train, driving the Poles out of the wagons. The thirteen men stood by the pile of coal and looked around, blinking. Janeczko felt so weak and shaky he had to lean against Mariusz Sędecki's shoulders. Sędecki's red hair was sticky with dust and dirt and looked grey; the journey hadn't broken his upright stance. Sędecki's shoulders were bony, and Janeczko felt the rubbing in his joints like a tickle on the palm of his hands.

The soil all around them gave off steam; it was already spring in Silesia, and the early morning sun brought the water rising out of the flooded meadows. They could see a chain of hills in the west, the Cat Hills. A long hollow sprawled in the other direction, at the end of which Janeczko made out a thick deciduous forest. Where ought they to go?
They would have stood around not knowing what to do, Grandfather said – big strong Sędecki, the pale stonemason Garniecki, Wiśniewski, who had made his living growing peaches, himself and the other farmers. They hadn't known a thing, he said, especially not what they meant when they told them they were to live on the Germans' farms now. As a child, Janeczko had thought his body was inextricably linked to the soil on which he lived. It hadn't been long before he'd realised that that may have been the case, but you could still leave the soil and survive; it was painful, but you could do it.
Towards the west, where the town of Obernigk must be, he saw the roofs and gables of villas rising to the skies above the forest. An unfamiliar scent of concrete and burnt matter wafted over. In the east they could see a couple of villages and hamlets behind

fields and islands of forest. Janeczko decided to head eastwards, to where there was nothing that was unfamiliar, out onto the fields.

The men who had climbed out of the wagon with him were still standing around the heap of coal, discussing who would go where and whether it was a good idea to split up at all. Sędecki led the discussion, suggesting that the farmers of Żdżary Wielkie, which was now a Ukrainian village by the name of Zastavne rather than a Polish one, ought to stay together and find a village here that was large enough to house them all. So they would set out and look for thirteen farmsteads as close together as possible. Wiśniewski butted in with a quiet voice, asking what on earth they were to say to people if they came across anyone. Sędecki stared at him aghast: What people?

You know, answered Wiśniewski: the German farmers. Can anyone speak German?

Janeczko stuck his nose in the air. For every minute they spent standing by the tracks talking, they lost a minute of daylight. He reached for the sack he had with him – he'd had snuff and a little bread in it – and felt it to check that the gun was still there. The tiny letters on the barrel spelled out *Mauser*; that was the only German word Janeczko knew. I don't think we'll find anyone to talk to, he said; and with impatience to Sędecki: You go ahead and look for a village with twelve farms; I'll be all right on my own.

Then he took his leave from the other Galicians and the bony shoulders and set off. Shocked, they watched him go, as if he had stood up from a trench without a word and strode out across enemy territory. He turned around, looked into their emaciated faces and said: We've got no time to lose.

Grandfather said walking through the fields strewn with cuckoo flower had felt rather like crossing a river, hoping the boards you're walking on won't suddenly collapse. And really: several times, Janeczko had the feeling the path below his feet would give way, the earth might open at any moment to swallow him up with relish. He moved away from the train tracks, and when the earth still hadn't started gaping after a few hundred yards he dared to turn around for the first time. The other men were walking towards a few closely grouped stables and houses. Janeczko stuck to his guns. He wanted to find somewhere close to the forest.

He didn't visit the German village until much later. He found the way they built their homes disconcerting, he said: all lumped together and the fields far outside the gates of the village. In Galicia, he said, everyone had settled on separate land and the farms

had been like islands, where you could see people coming from miles away.
The path didn't take him directly to the edge of the forest; it looped over a hillock. From up there, Janeczko made out a church at the foot of a slope, a graveyard sprawling in front of it. Grandfather said at that moment he'd thought how complicated it would be from then on, to have to take the dead to Galicia by train to bury them there.
Hate and fear, said Grandfather, have their own logic, just like love. He didn't want to like anything or call anything his own that they'd left behind; he didn't want to use their plates, eat fruit from the trees they had planted. Silesia, he'd thought, this slimy, shitty Silesia, was an interim solution, a kind of macabre joke they were allowing themselves until everything had been put in order back home in Galicia.

Janeczko could make out the men approaching the village in the distance. Their silhouettes almost merged with the background. The hats they were wearing had served alternately as pillows, plates, weapons and towels during the journey, and they perched on their heads like small ugly animals, their fur bristling at the sight of the houses. Each of them was carrying, pushing or lugging as much as he could; sacks of tools, pots and pans, some of them had seed with them. Nobody had thought to bring much food; their provisions had run out somewhere after Opole.
From his vantage point, Janeczko watched the men circling ever closer around the houses of Osola, peering over the fences and calling out:
Jest tam ktoś? Is anyone there?
The calls of *Jest tam ktoś* spread over the hollow like a wave, said Grandfather, filling every nook and cranny of the village and the fields, out into the forest, the meadows and up to the sky. The men began rattling at the gates, throwing stones at barns, breaking branches from the trees, whistling, punching at fences, approaching the doors to the houses with shouts and snorts. Grandfather said: That's how we'd chased away evil spirits in Galicia. Their sticks raised, the first groups of men had finally dared to enter the houses.

It was on the edge of that Lower Silesian forest that Janeczko found the farm he grew to hate from the pit of his soul. From far off, all he could make out was something vaguely roof-like, but once he was closer he saw there was a farmyard not even ten yards away from the forest, with a freshly whitewashed farmhouse and a brick stable

and barn. All the buildings had tiled roofs, not thatched with reeds like the houses in Galicia. A long, fenced-in garden stretched to the south, chicken and rabbit pens adjacent to it. There were no domestic animals left alive in Silesia: the hens had been taken by foxes, hawks and deserters and the rabbits had starved in their cages.

Janeczko stood on the gravel path separating the farm from the dense oak forest for some time, as if he had to decide which side to make his home. As his eyes wandered from the farm back to the woods, he caught sight of a young tawny owl on one of the outer branches, staring motionless in his direction; Janeczko spun around. He had thought for a moment the owl wasn't looking at him, but at something that had been standing behind him just a moment before – but there was nothing there. Suddenly he shivered, and he admitted to himself that he'd rather be in the village with the others, driving out his fear with shouts and noise.

At the moment Janeczko had appeared, the farm had held its breath. Janeczko heard his blood rushing in his ears, it was so silent. His heart beat against his ribcage as he began inspecting the fence: thick drops of dried paint still beaded the posts. Black. Was there really nobody there?

He tried to make out traces in the garden but everything was so overgrown with Virginia creeper that it was impossible to tell anything. Hesitant, he took the hunting rifle out of his sack. The gate was on the open side of the U that the buildings formed. Janeczko gripped his Mauser as he walked towards the gate, wrapped his hand around the handle, feeling the cool of the metal, and finally thrust it open. Then he stepped into the farmyard, took a couple of steps, stumbled and gave a groan.

Several drops of blood came away from the wound in his thigh, seeping into the linen of his trousers. Just beyond the gate, camouflaged as a tangle of yarrow and lemon balm, a bramble bush had lain in wait, grasping at Janeczko's trouser leg and tasting blood as soon as he had entered. Grandfather said: the first thing he planned to do, if he really were to stay, was to dig up the bramble bush and let it wither and die. At that point, though, someone might have stepped out of the house at any moment and explained that it was all a misunderstanding; or someone might have stepped out to shoot him down without a word.

Janeczko stared at the door to the house, above which hung a copper swastika. He stared at the stable, the barn, but nothing but the blades of grass moved a muscle. Before I entered the house I took down the swastika and put it face-down on the ground, said Grandfather.

Janeczko pulled the bramble thorn out of his wound and stood upright again. The grass inside the fence stood high like in a forest clearing. Now and then he thought he saw movement between its blades; it must have been just mice. At the end of the yard, in front of the stable, was a dog kennel giving off an appalling stench. Janeczko heard flies buzzing inside it and decided, in the unlikely case that he really did bring his wife and his little son Darek here, to set the kennel alight and burn in its flames everything he might find of the man who had built the farm and hung the swastika above the door.

For every step he finally took towards the door, Janeczko would have liked to take two steps backwards. Standing before the three stone steps leading up to it, he ran his eyes across the yard again: over the walnut tree at the fence, the chicken pen, the cesspit, the barn with its door ajar. A cool wind seemed to escape from the barn, a scent of wood and resin along with it.

Then he noticed the pair of yellow eyes that had been watching him closely all along. As quick as a flash, Janeczko picked up a stone from the ground and threw it at the barn door. Be gone, he shouted, shouted three times: Be gone! Be gone! Be gone! The eyes vanished, and there was nothing more to be seen in the barn.

In the hall he was once again enveloped in that scent which had wafted towards him during the train journey. *Jest tam ktoś?* he called several times, his voice husky, and when nobody answered he pushed the kitchen door open and went in. There was nobody there.

Grandfather said: In a sea of mushrooms stood a table and chair. An especially delicate mushroom had been growing on the tabletop, he said, which he'd brushed off with a rapid sweep of his hand. The window was open wide, granting a view of the Cat Hills ranging on the other side of the hollow. They were bare for the most part; nothing but brushwood grew on their slopes and swamps spread around their depressions. The reeds surrounding them swayed. Janeczko turned his eyes away and closed the window.

The wind had blown a thin layer of earth into the kitchen, which had settled on the floor and the table. He hadn't been able to put one foot in front of the other without crushing entire families of mushrooms: yellowish ones on long stalks, orange fungus, brownish mushrooms with slimy caps.

There was a newspaper on the windowsill, which he'd picked up between pinched fingertips and dropped on the table, at the place where the mushroom had been growing. Grandfather said he hadn't understood what it said in German, but there had been a Polish flag flying on the front page.

In the room adjoining the kitchen, the Virginia creeper reached well inside through the open window, its tendrils gripping the settee and the little bedside table in a tight stranglehold. Outside, dusk was already settling over the garden and the fields. Janeczko had actually intended to look around the cellar and the attic and he hadn't been in the barn yet either; he didn't know what was hiding in there.

But as he stood in front of the settee his last remaining strength was only enough to shove the thickest tendrils aside and lie down on the bed of leaves. Then he fell asleep.

Grandfather said he'd woken up several times that first night, certain he'd heard footsteps in the attic. Not the scurrying of an animal, not a hesitant seeking and padding, but clear, firm steps of a man in boots: first the slight slam of heels set down, then the feet treading and the shifting of weight that made the floorboards groan. One foot had been set in front of the other above his head; once, said Grandfather, the footsteps had paced halfway across the attic. To make sure he wasn't dreaming, he had listed all the landowners in his Galician village in a fraction of a second, starting with the first farm by the river: Khmyelnyc'kyj, Koval'cuk, Ivancyk, Vasilen'ko, Piddubnyj, Romanyszyn. Grandfather said: When I was little my mother taught me the names of our Ukrainian neighbours instead of the Lord's Prayer.

When he got to the last name, Wojciechovich, and he could still hear the footsteps, Janeczko sat upright, released himself from the creeper leaves and stood in the room, his heart pounding. Suddenly the footsteps had died away, silence, nothing to be heard, neither in the attic nor out in the fields. Had he been imagining things? The especially loud slams of the heels at Ivancyk, the creaking of a floorboard at the last syllable of Romanyszyn?

Grandfather said he'd felt lost, standing there in the middle of the room, and he'd seriously considered going back to the others in the village, across the fields at night. What could he have said to them? That something was prowling around on the edge of the forest? Apart from that, the fields were still submerged in deep black, the clouds only occasionally releasing the full moon. Mistrustful, he sat back down on the edge of the settee, not to fall asleep again but to listen out for every sound, every

movement. The silence remained. He began knotting some of the young creepers together in the darkness, eventually yawning. At some point his eyes had fallen closed.

Janeczko had woken up a few minutes later, thinking he'd heard a voice. Like a flash, he sat up and saw a figure squatting outside on the window ledge, half concealed by the creeper.

At that moment the full moon broke through the clouds, and the eyes of the huddled creature shone out. Janeczko made a leap backwards towards the wall and screamed at the top of his voice: Jesus Christ!

The thing had disappeared then, said Grandfather, had jumped away, and he'd seen clearly in the moonlight how big it was and how long and bushy its jet-black tail. That was the curse that lay over the Cat Hills, said Grandfather, which had haunted him from that moment on. Although Janeczko had managed to bolt the warped wooden window, he hadn't been able to get a wink of sleep after that.

By the position of the moon, Janeczko estimated it would be dawn shortly. Until then he paced up and down the room thinking, about the mark the Germans had left behind, the stove he would tile, and that the first thing he'd have to do in the morning was go up to the attic, if he were ever to spend a peaceful night in the house. From time to time his eyes darted towards the window and the ceiling, but neither did the beast show itself another time, nor did the floorboards creak above him again. Grandfather said during that night he'd walked away from madness very slowly, step by step, and in the end he'd saved himself into the morning.

When Janeczko could make out the outlines of his hand in the dark room, he got up, shook the creepers from his shoulders, took his rifle and walked step by step up the stairs to the attic.

Cobwebs covered the walls, threads hanging from the ceiling and tickling his ears. He brushed across his head, his hands agitated. He tensed his muscles, then he thrust the door open.

It was still night under the roof. There were a few tiles missing, the first rays of sun piercing through the gaps and slicing up the room. Janeczko had frozen at the first moment, ready to fight off anything that might launch itself upon him, but nothing happened. His eyes accustomed themselves slowly to the darkness and he recognised

vertical and horizontal beams, a few abandoned pieces of furniture caught in dust and webs. A draught blew through the open door. From the rear of the loft came a languid, almost cosy sound. Janeczko screwed up his eyes and walked in.
The floorboards groaned beneath his feet; he felt the wood giving way when he shifted his weight. Once he was almost halfway across the room he stepped on a board that squeaked so loudly it sounded as if he had stepped on a living creature. He leapt aside, clutching at a rafter. After the thunder of his pulse had ebbed away he let go again. By now it had got light enough for Janeczko to see into the corners of the attic, and he began to feel slightly better. Beneath a gap in the roof, against the light, something was hanging from a rafter. From the doorway, Janeczko had taken it for a rather irregular vertical beam. Once he'd got closer he saw that it was swaying imperceptibly and that the irregular beam had a desiccated, collapsed face, was wearing a Sunday suit and moving slowly to and fro in the draught.

Grandfather said: Herr Dietrich hanged himself in his hat and tie, but he didn't take off his work boots and put on his Sunday shoes. They were great clumsy boots, with thick soles and reinforced heels. The hat had fallen off his head and was lying a foot below him. When Janeczko picked it up a family of mice scattered in all directions. He dropped it again and looked at the man. He wasn't blond, he said: The hair still attached to his head was almost black and came down to his eye sockets.
I had to get rid of him, said Grandfather, before I fetched Grandmother and the boy. So he'd plucked up his courage and sawn the rope in two with his pocket-knife.
The body fell to the floor with a thud and lay there just as it had been hanging, as straight as a die. Janeczko opened the jacket and felt the inside pocket. Finding something stiff, he reached in and pulled out a piece of paper and an identity pass. The pass was the same as the one they had issued him with in Galicia, except that there was no "P" emblazoned on the first page. The photo had been torn out but the name Dietrich was clearly legible below it. Janeczko put both papers back in the man's pocket. Then he searched the chest of drawers and the cabinet in the attic, finding a moth-eaten blanket in which he wrapped Herr Dietrich and carried him down the stairs.

Once Janeczko had laid Herr Dietrich down his eyes fell on the barn. Taking long paces, he walked towards it and opened the two high doors. Nothing was to be able to

watch him secretly as he moved around the farmyard, nothing was to lie in wait for him or surprise him. He breathed the cool, metallic scent that came towards him.

He found it pleasant to walk on a cement floor, to see everything clearly in the light falling through the open doors. On the right he saw a pile of wood towering up to the ceiling. Janeczko walked over to it and moved a few logs to and fro, weighing them in his hands and climbing around. Then he noticed something at the very rear corner that looked like a small cushion. He shifted a couple of blocks of wood and reared back in shock. It was a nest, lined with black crow's feathers, two beaks at its centre.

Grandfather said it was the beast's nest. He had hesitated for a moment and then taken the bound willow rods leaning on a machine and swept the nest apart in all directions. He'd even taken the logs that had concealed it and laid them on one of the machines. He would saw them up later.

Janeczko sat down on the steps to the veranda and stared at the corpse under its cover. When the sun began burning his shoulders he stood up, bent over for the swastika still lying face-down in front of the door, and slipped it under the blanket with Herr Dietrich. Then he fetched the wheelbarrow and a spade from the barn, heaved the corpse in the blanket into it along with the swastika, and set off for the Cat Hills.