

Stefanie vor Schulte, *Boy with a Black Rooster* (tr. Charlotte Collins)

Sample translation from

**Stefanie vor Schulte**

*Boy with a Black Rooster*

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June 2021

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When the painter comes to create an altarpiece for the church, Martin knows that when winter ends he will leave with him. He will go with him and not look back.

In the village they have been talking about the painter for a long time. Now he is here and wants to go into the church, but the key has disappeared. The three men with the most say in the village, Henning, Seidel and Sattler, are looking for the key, crawling among the dog roses that grow around the arch. Wind billows in their shirts and trousers. Their hair is blown about their heads. From time to time the men rattle at the church door, again and again. In turn. Perhaps the other rattled it wrong. And every time they are baffled to find that the door is still locked.

The painter stands beside them with his tatty possessions and watches with a cheeky grin. They had pictured someone rather different, but painters don't grow on trees in this part of the world. Especially not now, in wartime.

Martin sits on the rim of the fountain, not ten paces from the church door. He's eleven now. Very tall and thin. He lives on what he earns. But on Sundays he doesn't earn anything, and has to fast. He grows nonetheless. When will a piece of clothing actually fit him? Trousers are always too big, then the next moment too small.

He has lovely eyes. People notice that straight away. Dark and patient. Everything about him appears quiet and thoughtful. And that makes the villagers uncomfortable. They don't care for it when someone is too lively or too quiet. Coarseness they can understand. Craftiness, too. But thoughtfulness in the face of an eleven-year-old boy – they don't like that.

And then of course there's the rooster. The boy always has it with him. Perched on his shoulder. Or sitting on his lap. Hidden under his shirt. When the creature is asleep it looks like an old man, and everyone in the village says it's the Devil.

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The key still hasn't been found, but the painter is here all the same. So now the man must be shown the church. Henning talks in circles until his suspicion suddenly falls on Franzi. She's got the key. No one knows what gives him this idea. They send for her anyway. Martin is apprehensive. He likes Franzi.

Franzi comes straight away. It's not far from the guesthouse where she works. She is fourteen, pulling her shawl around her shoulders. The wind blows her hair into her eyes. She is very beautiful, and the men have an urge to hurt her.

It turns out Franzi has nothing whatsoever to do with the key. This is annoying.

They've wasted enough time looking for it already, so they need another solution. The painter has come to sit with Martin on the rim of the fountain. The rooster flutters down from the boy's shoulder, stalks over to the painter's spattered bundle and pecks at it.

The three men debate whether kicking in a church door is allowed. Are you allowed to open the house of God by force? Or to smash a window? Which would be more sacrilegious? The door or the window? They conclude that force is not good, because you reach God only through faith and the Word, not through a determined kick.

"Or through death," Franzi interjects.

She's so daring, thinks Martin. For that reason alone she must be protected all her life, so he can watch her daring to do things.

The painter laughs. He likes it here. He winks at Franzi. But she's not that sort of girl and doesn't wink back.

They ought to ask the pastor, but they only have the visiting pastor from the next village. They buried their own pastor last year, and no new one has appeared in the interim. Nor is it clear where they should get a new one from, because until now one was always there, and who knows how it

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was in the beginning, whether the village was there first, or pastor and church. So since then they've been borrowing the neighbouring pastor. But because he's not as young as he was, and needs some time to cover the distance between the two villages, the service on Sunday isn't until after midday.

At any rate, the visiting pastor must now be asked how they can gain entry to the church. But who should go and ask him? Yellow clouds are lowering in the sky, and they would have to go across the fields, where there is no shelter. The lightning flashes up here are coming every few seconds. *BAM! BAM! BAM!* It could go on all night. Henning, Seidel and Sattler are too important to the village for them to risk their lives.

"I can go," Martin suggests. He's not afraid.

"At least, if it were him, it wouldn't really matter," murmurs Seidel. The others hesitate. They know Martin is smart enough. He can convey the question. He's also sure to be able to remember the answer. They wrestle with their consciences and whisper amongst themselves. Say at last: "All right, off you go."

"Why doesn't one of you go, in this filthy weather?" asks the painter.

"He's got the Devil with him," answers Henning. "Nothing can happen to him."

2.

The little hut is the last one on top of the hill, up where the frozen meadows meet the forest. Anyone who wants to drive their cattle into the forest must pass the hut. Sometimes the boy is sitting on the doorstep, calls out a friendly greeting, offers his help. Sometimes the rooster is

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perched on the handle of the grindstone which, over the years, has sunk into the earth and is now overgrown with lichen, baked in by frost, immovable. It was on this stone that the father first sharpened his axe, then slaughtered all of them except the boy.

Perhaps that was where it began.

Bertram went up the hill because the family hadn't come to the village for days. They were debtors, and debtors must show their faces so that people have a chance to scold them.

So Bertram goes up to remind the family of its social responsibilities.

"But they were all dead," he relates. Pleased that, from that day forward, people will hang on his every word and he will always have a story to tell.

Into the hut he goes, and is immediately attacked by a black devil. The rooster. Face and hands scratched to bits. Bertram kneels, tries to take cover, and only then sees the blood.

"Blood everywhere. Stench, corpses. An inferno, I'm telling you," he says.

"A what?" someone asks.

"I'm telling you, they've been lying there for days. Worms on them already. Writhing. Ugh."

He spits on the ground, and his grandson, who is fond of him, promptly spits as well. He pats the boy on the cheek.

"Good lad." To the others: "That damned rooster. The Devil incarnate. I'm not going up there again."

"But the boy," someone says.

"Yes, he was alive. Amid it all. Probably gone quite mad. All that blood, those wounds – gaping, you understand. You can see right down into a body. Not nice at all. That child must have gone quite mad."

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But the child has not gone mad and doesn't die, either. He is only about three years old and must be very tenacious to still be alive. No one looks after him. Yes, they took the corpses away. But they didn't dare approach the child. Perhaps they were afraid of the rooster. It's possible they were simply lazy.

But the fact that the boy is healthy, sane, and has, admittedly, a friendly disposition – this is scarcely comprehensible, and is hard to bear. There are those who wish the child had not in fact survived, then they wouldn't constantly have to puzzle over it and feel ashamed.

He is content with very little. You can entrust your cattle to the boy all day long and he is content with an onion as payment. This is convenient. If only it weren't so macabre, with the rooster on his back. He is not a child of love. He is made of hunger and cold. At night he takes the rooster with him under the cover, they know this for a fact. And in the morning the boy wakes the rooster, because it has slept through the sunrise, and then the boy laughs, and the people down in the village hear the laughter and cross themselves, because the child is playing with the Devil and lets him share his bed. But then they drive their cattle past the hut after all. And have onions on hand, just in case.

3•

In the middle of the fields the alder tree is in flames and crumbles into black dust.

The next lightning bolt is destined for Martin. A bright pain shoots down his back and explodes inside his head. For a moment everything is suspended, and Martin wonders whether perhaps he will die. But immediately afterwards, or hours later, he can't say, he wakes again. The

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storm has passed. He can still see the clouds in the sky, heading for another place, having finished with this one for today.

Martin tries to stand. He can't help weeping a little, because he's still alive and relieved about that, but had perhaps hoped it would all be over. Life. The rooster is waiting at his side.

Later, he reaches the neighbouring village. Finds the pastor's house. There's not a dry patch anywhere on his body. His teeth are chattering.

"He's so thin," says the pastor's wife. "There'll be nothing left of him once we get him out of his clothes."

She wraps him in a dusty blanket and sits him in front of the tiled stove, where other children are already sitting. The pastor's own. Once there were more of them, but some have died. They're having boiled oat gruel. The pastor's wife prepares the bowls of gruel and puts them on the stove. The children push and shove and hastily spit into the bowl they think has the most in, so no one else will want to eat it.

They stare at Martin in wonderment. His teeth chatter, and he tries to smile. He has never seen such cheerful children. At home, the little ones are always afraid. They walk hunched over, dodging the adults, who dole out slaps. And because that is what Martin is familiar with, and the sharp pain of a leather strap splitting the skin on a naked back, he has often thought that he is better off without a family. But a family like the pastor's – Martin would have liked one like that.

The children eat up all their gruel; there's nothing left over, but there is soup. The pastor's wife brings him a bowl. The soup is thin, the smell unfamiliar, but it warms him.

He enjoys the fire. The bird has crept into a corner and hisses when the children get too close.

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Now Martin can tell them the reason for his visit. He describes the situation in the village, conveys the concerns of Henning, Seidel and Sattler.

“What idiots,” the pastor’s wife says.

The pastor’s eyes twinkle. “So what do you think, my boy?” he asks Martin.

Martin is not used to being asked his opinion about things. He has to listen in to his thoughts first, to find out whether he has any of his own on the matter.

“If God is like everyone says, it doesn’t matter to him whether we fetch the key or kick in a door.”

“That’s a good answer,” says the pastor.

“If I go back now and bring them the answer, Henning won’t be satisfied.”

“But God will be satisfied.”

“But how does he know about me? No one’s praying for me.”

“God is everywhere, and He is infinite. And He has implanted some of His infinite nature in us. Infinite stupidity, for example. Infinite war.”

Martin does not feel infinite.

“It can hardly be possible for us to contain His infiniteness. And so it’s constantly escaping, and that’s how God recognizes us. By our traces. Do you understand?”

“No,” says Martin.

“Well.” The pastor scratches his head and pulls out a few hairs. “This, for example,” he says, holding them up. “All our lives our heads are full of it, and more keeps growing all the time. Or here.” He scrapes his forearm

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with his palm until flakes of skin trickle from it. “Skin,” he says, conspiratorially. “We’re losing skin all the time. And we have to piss. And we bleed. And none of it ever stops until we’re dead and with the Almighty. Until then, he follows our traces and finds every sinner, no matter how well they hide themselves.”

The pastor comes very close and plucks an eyelash from Martin’s cheek with trembling fingers.

Martin looks at the eyelash. It looks just like any eyelash, he thinks, and says so.

“But the eyelash knows that it’s yours. And that’s what it tells God.”

#### 4.

The pastor has given the boy some good words to consider, but no answer he could give to Henning, Sattler and Seidel. They won’t be satisfied, and of course will take it out on Martin. Besides, the boy feels sure he has overlooked something. Now, as he struggles homeward, with the saturated meadows trying to hang on to his feet with every step before releasing them with a squelch, his mind works at a level that renders his body impervious to the clammy cold. And when at last he reaches the village, he knows both where the key is and what answer to give the three men.

As on the previous day, the three are outside the church, creating agitation befitting the seriousness of the situation. And although the child has been brave, defied the storm and took the walk upon himself, the men manage to behave as if it is Martin who owes them something and not they who, on the contrary, should be grateful to him.

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“Look, here he is,” says Henning.

The painter is still, or once again, sitting on the rim of the fountain, eating boiled eggs, which don’t go down well without schnapps. A good thing Franzi has brought him some. Franzi, who balls her fists in her apron with joy when she sees the boy. Martin, whom she loves like a thing only she understands and that therefore belongs only to her.

Henning plants himself in front of Martin. The other two loom up beside him.

“Oh, we can’t wait to hear this,” says Seidel, and Sattler whacks the boy in the face so abruptly that he is knocked to the ground.

Henning berates Sattler. “Idiot. I haven’t even asked yet.”

Sattler shrugs an apology. Martin gets back on his feet. He’s well and truly decided now that he will not let on that he knows where the key is, or say that the pastor only gave him confusing answers.

“So?” asks Henning.

“Well,” says Martin, licking a drop of blood from his lip. “You have to make a second door,” he says.

The three men glance at each other. Reassured that none of them understand this.

“In the door,” says Martin. “In the wooden door of the church. You cut a second door in it, a humble one pleasing in the sight of God. That’s what the pastor said. Exactly that.”

Everyone looks at the church door Back at Martin. Speechless. At the door again.

“A humble door, pleasing in the sight of God,” repeats Martin firmly, and nods. The painter, sitting on the rim of the fountain, hears it all. How stupid people are, he thinks. How glad he is that he has pitched up here.

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The three men deliberate, but there's nothing for it, that's what the pastor said and the men must comply. Sattler sets off to fetch tools and soon returns with a hammer and saw. They don't find drawing the little door onto the big one at all easy. Also, they're going to need a drill.

Martin goes and sits on the rim of the fountain with the painter, who gives him a handful of nuts. Martin eats them gratefully, although they make his gums itch, and his throat, right up to his ears. Franzi brings a jug of juice. The three of them sit together while the men go to work. Not very skilfully. And so Martin, Franzi and the painter experience a delicious moment of rapt contemplation, since they don't have to do anything themselves for once and are instead being given the opportunity to observe others doing something incredibly stupid.

The resulting door, it's fair to say, is no artisanal masterpiece, but Henning, Seidel and Sattler possess only limited expertise. Their talents lie mainly in the intimidation of others. That, though, is a tried and tested method. And so, after sawing a rectangle into the wooden door and, without really understanding what they're doing, letting it fall into the interior of the church, they refuse to allow each other inside, because, strictly speaking, and they know this from experience, the Lord is strict about such matters. Which, in turn, is not true at all. They know this as well. It's just that they're scared stiff of stepping through the crookedly sawn rectangle. Their ears are quite hot with the suspicion that the boy might have erred in conveying the pastor's message, and that they might have been wrong to set about it straight away instead of questioning him more closely. A couple more slaps and Martin's message might perhaps have come out differently. More conveniently, somehow.

Now they are fetching hinges and lock, and as they don't stock such things in the village, they dismantle Hansen's front door – no, anyone but Hansen, he's always running off, ah, right, well in that case – they dismantle old Gerti's front door. She gives them an earful, but accepts it when they assure her that her hinges could never perform any worthier task than becoming part of a church door. This, of course, also reflects on

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her, Gerti. She will be allowed to use the new, little door whenever she likes, because what does she need a house for anyway when the Lord God is her home.

With every passing minute, the painter is more and more happy to be here. In all his years of travelling he has never seen anything so splendid. And he has never encountered two such beautiful faces and honest souls as those of Franzi and Martin.

When the hole in the church door has finally been made into a proper entrance, and, after much fumbling about, lock and key also fit perfectly, Henning, Seidel and Sattler are as proud as little children. If only they had a task like this to do every day, life in the village could be quite pleasant.

The humble door, pleasing in the sight of God, is opened and closed, and of course there is some wrangling over which of them should be the first to step in and then out again, but Henning has a brief attack of magnanimity and firmly insists that Sattler should be the first to enter the church. For this Seidel will never forgive them. However peaceably he sits alongside them in the future, he will be silently consumed by a desire for revenge, and will plot to do away with them both. Poisonings, accidents – planned ones, that is – or falls on the mountain: Seidel’s imagination knows no bounds. With all the ideas he has, Seidel could have a good career as the author of thrilling detective stories, but unfortunately Seidel is fantasizing well ahead of his time and can neither read nor write.

Now at last the painter is invited to enter the church.

“Want to come with me?” he asks the boy. Martin strokes the rooster between its feathers. If it could purr, it would.

But Martin doesn’t come with him, nor is he meant to, because Henning controls access to the church. And in this village the boy is one of the damned and has no business in the house of God.

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That aside, Martin is very tired, knows he will see the painter more often now, and is looking forward to it. Martin smiles as, out of the darkness of the church, the dishevelled Hansen staggers toward Henning and the painter.

Yes, Martin thinks to himself, that was a nice idea with the door. And also, in a way, self-defence.

5.

When Godel arrives, Martin is ready. The clothes he is wearing are the ones he wore in the night. He picks up the rooster and puts it on his shoulder.

“Does it have to come?” says Godel.

“He’s coming,” says the boy.

“You’re carrying the potatoes to the market.”

“Yes.”

“It’d be easier for you without.”

Martin smiles.

“You’ll get a hunchback,” says Godel. But they have this conversation every market day, and the boy cannot be persuaded not to bring the creature with him.

Godel, her daughter and the boy walk for more than two hours. The trees are frozen. The landscape looks dead.

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Although Godel doesn't say a word to him on the journey and forbids her daughter to speak to him, either, Martin is in a good mood. He likes the daughter.

He walks about ten paces behind Godel. Carrying the rooster and the sack of potatoes. His clogs clatter on the hard ground. His ankles protrude from the bottom of his trousers. His hands from his sleeves. His breath comes in clouds. The rooster grips his shoulder with its claws. Godel holds her daughter by the hand. She is leading a goat on her right, and carrying a baby in a cloth across her breast. The seam of Godel's skirt is dirty, and scrapes across the muddy ground. And Martin listens closely to the scraping until it fills all the space inside his head.

He notices a rush of air, but it is only when something hits his head that suddenly all of it is there: the thundering hooves, the snorting horse, the rider's coat that smacks him across the cheek.

In his dreams he still feels this rush of air. What happens next will haunt him from now till the end of days.

One minute the rider is galloping past Martin, a second later he draws level with Godel, reaches down to the girl, picks her up as if she were nothing and stuffs her under his cloak, this patch of darkness in the milky frost. Somewhere in that darkness now is the child, who has not let out a single cry. It has all happened too fast. The mother's hand still hangs in the air, feels her daughter's warmth. And already she is gone.

The rider has plucked her like an apple; a moment later he is on the ridge of the hill, and the black horse rears up.

Godel lets out a scream. She starts to run. The baby bounces at her breast, whimpering. Martin runs after her, catches up, overtakes her, chases after the rider.

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The rider. All his life Martin has known the tale of the rider in the black cloak who snatches children away. Always a girl and a boy. And they never reappear. And now he has met him, and runs after him.

Meanwhile, the rider looks back and catches sight of the boy. A fowl is dancing around his head like a mad shadow. The rider shudders. He has heard about the Devil in the form of a rooster. That he lives up here. He crosses himself and thinks, I have stolen a child from the Devil. God Almighty. He digs his heels into the horse's side. The horse pounds the air with its hooves. And a moment later the rider is dashing down the far side of the hill.

Martin gasps for breath. The air tastes of blood. He falls to his knees. He knows that the girl is lost.

Godel reaches him.

Tears stream down her face. When Martin sees her weeping, he lets out a sob. The rooster on his shoulder starts to crow, and it is a sound that pierces the soul. A high lamentation sent out into the world.

Only then does the road fall silent.

## 6.

The journey back to the village lasts forever, because Godel, in her maternal pain, wavers between giving up and freezing to death at the side of the road, and pulling herself together because the baby needs her, as do the other three children waiting at home. Martin supports Godel and helps her as much as he can. But when the village comes into view, Godel finally collapses, because she senses now the daily existence that lies ahead once the first great mourning is over and she is condemned to eternal

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pain. How she will miss the girl. The blonde plait on the pillow in the morning. Her serious face, going about her work in the kitchen. From now on she will only sense the girl in the corner of her eye. Like a gentle guest from another world. She will pause in her daily chores, hoping that the angel will stay, scarcely daring to breathe. And yet the apparition will fade. And, every time, Godel's heart will become weaker, and the pain will accompany her all the way to her deathbed, together with the agonizing question of what happened to the child.

So Godel finally collapses. Grief has already carved itself so deep into her face that she looks years older. Her tears fall without stopping and milk drips from her dress. She just wants to lie here now, unconscious. And Martin cannot wake her; he eventually leans her against a tree-trunk, along with the infant. Rushes the rest of the way back to fetch help. The boy reaches the village and shouts with all the breath he has left in his lungs after running so fast.

But because the villagers have such doubts about Martin, it takes an unbearably long time for them to grasp the seriousness of the situation – the tale of the rider, the terrible calamity – and hurry down the hill, jackets flying, to come to Godel's aid. What lamentation then breaks forth. Godel is carried away. Her last glance is directed at Martin, and he can read what is in it. Never again will he accompany Godel to market. From this day forth she will avoid him. Because perhaps it is his fault, after all. Perhaps it was the black devil that attracted such misfortune.

Exhausted, Martin stays behind at the fountain, and it is a very long time before he sets off for home. The hut at the edge of the forest, whose door has been kicked in. Where there is nothing to steal. Only a jug. The blankets, and the straw bedding he sleeps on.

The rooster is still finding grain and crumbs between the floorboards. When did anyone last bake and cook here? A long time ago. Martin lights a fire, because one should have a fire at this time, not because he needs it.

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He holds his blue, frozen hands up to the embers, not because he longs to, but to preserve himself.

He knows, too, that his mind works better when he has at least somewhat taken care of his body. He drinks a little, and fetches the apple he found recently and kept as iron rations. He shares it with the rooster. The rooster gets the worms.

Martin chews slowly and stares into the flames. He strokes the rooster, and is still awake long after the stars come out. A whisper clutches at his soul; it comes from the rooster and from his own heart and it forms a resolution, the gravity of which no one will ever take from him. The rider: what he must do now is find the rider. He will go in search of the vanished children. He lines his soul with this knowledge. He knows now that his life has a purpose.

He falls asleep sitting upright and wakes only at daybreak, when a terrible clanging and clattering jolts the world from its nocturnal quiet, and from the lower edges of the forest a cart pulled by a donkey comes bumping across the hard-frozen open field, on its coachbox a blond child crashing together two metal discs.