

***A Foot in the Water (Mit einem Fuss draussen)* by Anaïs Meier (Volland & Quist)
Sample translation by Jo Heinrich**

I take a breath in the bulrushes.

I'm in the bulrushes, taking a breath, hoping they haven't seen me. But they have. Here, in the bulrushes at the back of the lake. They'll get me out in a minute, but first they've got to put on their waders, because they aren't man enough to go in without them.

It's my life's purpose: to get it out, and to investigate where it comes from and what it wants.

I hear a hissing. I look left. It's the duck, laughing at me. I'm lying down here making the duck look bigger than me. The foot's near, but too far off. Now they're coming out of their clubhouse. I don't want them to see the foot. They mustn't find out my mission. They screw up everything for me; I'm doing this on my own.

They're getting closer.

I crawl away, through the earth and muck. The bulrushes aren't thick enough; they can probably spot me. The fear's pounding in the mud.

I can see their faces now; I creep backwards and reach into the dirt on the slope. Pull myself up on the bulrushes, among the reeds, and run away. They won't catch me, they won't.

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I ran, and I dived over the little wire fence out of the park, where the lake is, to the building site, and crouched behind the bushes. Not exactly the best position for a man over fifty.

There aren't that many leaves on the bushes yet – it's only just turned April. There's a huge hole in the ground behind me. They want to build some apartments there, but they never quite get round to starting on them, which is just as well for me as I've got a great hiding place here. I peek through the sparse leaves and branches and I can see the SAC lot standing around in the lake in their waders, their heads moving back and forth looking for me. I've tricked them this time, those SACers. The Swiss Anglers' Club have never been known for their intelligence, just for drinking beer and talking crap all day long.

I've got a great view of the park from here, and no one can see me, which is a bonus. But I can see them perfectly with my binoculars. I can see the youngsters sitting on the jetty, holding their cannabis cigarettes behind their backs. I can see the duck swimming a slalom between the SAC's waders with an indifferent look in his eye. That duck with his hoity-toity affectations: he always thinks he's a cut above.

The first of them are getting out of the water now and going back to their clubhouse; they always sit in front of it and stare out at the world. The club hut isn't far; the park's small. It hasn't really got a name. It's named after the lake – the Egelsee – as

there isn't much else there: the lake, the club hut, a jetty leading into the lake, three benches on the path, and trees. The lake is shaped like a kidney.

I can see it all from here. I'm really familiar with the park, and the lake too. I come here twice a day to do my balancing and breathing exercises. I always do the flamingo here. It gives me a symbiotic relationship with the lake, and I connect with the universe.

That's how I keep everything here in equilibrium. But no one says thank you to me, ever. Not once has anyone come up and said, 'Thank you Gerhard, you've done well, Super-Gerhard; you really have.' That's me: I'm Gerhard.

Since the foot's been in the lake, I haven't been able to do my exercises any more. It disturbs nature's equilibrium. I lose my balance and keep needing to steady myself, which doesn't look elegant – the flamingo pose on two legs. All this proves the lake is disturbed with the foot being in it. The lake turns to me and asks for help. That's fine as I'm a hypersensitive person. I'm in touch with things. So I have to get the foot out, firstly out of respect for the lake, but also because I'll be able to find out whose foot it is. Then I can play the Inspector and solve a criminal case; that's something I've always wanted to do. Blüehler, the security guard, should really be the authority responsible for the law, but she has laziness written all over her face, and on her fat backside. I certainly won't mention the foot to her; I'll get it myself and then I'll be able to take all the credit. Once Blüehler even had her flies undone and I never said a word to her about it! Blüehler has a dog, a collie. His name is Grimsel and he's actually alright. But I can't understand what he's doing with her. He could do so much better. Grimsel doesn't get on with the duck, and that's why he and I see eye to eye.

The duck really drives me up the wall. I always make noises to annoy him, but not loud enough for people to notice. I don't know; maybe he's seen the foot, but he wouldn't tell me even if he had. Sometimes I'm scared he'll swim out and steal the foot from me, or maybe he'll destroy it; he might even end up eating it.

I think I'm still the only one who's seen the foot, even though it stands out so much, stuffed into its bright trainer. A man's trainer, with multicoloured laces, the kind that would put you in a good mood, I imagine. But I haven't quite got close enough to it yet.

It was a week ago when I first set eyes on the foot. It was still March then; now it's April and it's getting warmer. Soon the SAC will be setting up their loungers and putting out the ashtrays I'm sure they've stolen from the outdoor pool. Then they'll lie around on the loungers all day, drinking beer out of cans and mocking me. April always comes round again, every year.

Now I'm back here at home in my little bolthole, mulling things over with a good cup of thyme tea. This week is thyme week; next week it's sage again. I'm looking forward to sage! But that's neither here nor there.

The truth is, when you've got a foot in the water, you don't know where you stand. I've got to get it out and examine it more closely.

So far, I've tried with a branch, a fishing rod and a net, but it's always slipped away. It would be easy if I could use a boat, but the lake bylaws forbid it. So, I went to the SAC a few days ago, to ask to borrow some equipment: they're allowed in the lake.

In front of the little clubhouse there was only Kevin, the vicious junior, and Patrick the Crutch, who always has a crutch to prop up his excess weight. Patrick the Crutch is Blüehler's new boyfriend, so I had to be careful. Kevin and Patrick will most probably die of liver failure: they were having yet another beer. I asked about a boat and a rake, saying I had something to do in the lake.

They both went quiet for a moment, while their heads were getting their cogs moving. Then they opened their traps and roared. They call it a sense of humour; I've seen it all before. Kevin laughed so much he started coughing, and his face went red. I had a brief hope that maybe he'd choke. Then Patrick the Crutch said the lake was going to be cleaned and spruced up at some point later in the spring.

Yesterday I put on some wellies, with thick plastic tape to secure them to my trousers and all the way up, past my belly button, so that everything was sealed up and watertight. Then I took a long branch and waded into the lake, along the banks to the back, as far as the bulrushes; I could see the foot with its garish shoe through them.

Normally the SAC people leave me alone but sure enough, it's always the same as soon as anyone ever tries to do something good: they immediately jumped up from their loungers and told me to get out. Of course, I didn't get out, and so they got in, but first they had to put their stupid special trousers on, and I'd nearly reached the foot by the time they were ready. Vicious Kevin started throwing stones at me. As soon as I catch him alone, I'll give him a good hiding with that branch – I'm the Inspector now.

And then I went behind the bushes, by the big hole in the ground. I've got to think everything through carefully; after all, there's a case at stake here. And a matter of maintaining peace and order. In the park, at least.

It's always noisy here at home. We each have just a one-room bolthole in this old house, or 'this ole house' as the song goes. It was great for a long time; I've lived here for twenty years. There used to be lots of addicts, and punk haircuts. They're all fine by me, as long as they leave me in peace. But now some young men from a criminal gang of thugs have moved in. You can tell they're gang members by their uniform. They all wear the same white trainers and white striped jogging bottoms, although they aren't sporty in the least. At first it was just one; over the last few years more and more of them moved in, and then before I knew it, the whole house was full of them.

Every night they make a racket under my window – every single night. You can hear everything other people get up to. The house was supposed to have been pulled down a long time ago, but the architects are probably scared of coming here and surveying it. In any case, every year I get a letter telling me that the house will stay for another year. And every year it gets worse with the people living here. I can't get anything done here any more. But my Garden of Eden can be the park.

As I think about it all, I get a bad feeling. What if Patrick the Crutch lied about the date the lake's being cleaned? I really need to get the foot myself, before those wannabe anglers climb around amongst the animals with their rakes, scattering their idle talk

into the lake. I have to find out when they'll be raking it up this year, so I can beat them to it. I have to surf the internet to find out: the SAC has a calendar with click-on photos on there.

I'm on my way. Back to the park, and to the lake. My next step is going on the internet. I think the internet is a good thing: something I should have invented, like lots of the other things I've thought up. But no, I didn't manage that one. The internet didn't come from my own brain, which I find quite awe-inspiring.

Anyway, I know the youngsters have smartphones, and I had an idea: I could go and be sociable with them. Sometimes they shout stupid things at me when I can't get the flamingo right, but that doesn't happen often, and they leave me in peace the rest of the time. And they're always getting into arguments with the SAC about their cannabis cigarette butts. I smoked a bit of that, back in the day; I called them jazz cigarettes. A bit like in Kerouac's *On The Road*, as it were. But that was then. And now it's the internet.

It's usually me who collects up the butts and throws them in the bin; they should be thankful. I hope they haven't seen the foot yet. Or maybe they have. So I saunter up to the youngsters, extra slowly: I know exactly how to play it cool. I think of the sort of music they have in thrillers, dum-de-dum-de-dum, or that they play when someone cool walks across the grass. Then it's all about walking almost as if your legs were made of rubber and keeping your face neutral.

The youngsters look at me. I look back, and don't say a word. I've played that well. Then I ask them who their leader is. They laugh, but then they all look across at a tall kid with round glasses, like the ones hippies used to wear; I think they're good glasses. They have a fun look about them. The leader has old roller skates on and he's lying on the jetty awkwardly somehow, as if he's too tall for everything in some way. So I turn to him; his name is Corsin. I say, 'Corsin, it's war. It's war here in the park.' Corsin says he likes weirdos, they're not like his parents. I say, 'Corsin, I'll let you help me with my investigations, under my command.' He says his parents are both so conservative. 'Corsin,' I say, 'Corsin, there's a body in the lake.'

I don't know why I said 'body'. Anyway, it's made Corsin go quiet. A girl with pink hair, dopey from the weed, starts to giggle. I quickly correct myself: 'Well not a whole body as such, but a foot.' Then I say, 'The body must be somewhere too, though.' And just at that moment, I realise there must actually be a body somewhere here too!

'Where?' ask the youngsters.

'Behind there, in the bulrushes at the back,' I say. The girl says they're reeds. I don't like it when people do that, and I can't help noticing that the girl actually looks like a poison dwarf, with her stupid bright-coloured hair. But then I remember the haircuts I used to have as the young Gerhard, and I decide to stay calm.

So the youngsters take a look. And they see the foot. They see the foot and they stop talking. I've played that well.

Then I explain how important it is to surf the internet, to see when the anglers are cleaning the lake. The youngsters look over at the girl with the bubble-gum hair. She

opens her rucksack, takes out a smartphone and pushes her finger around on it. And then she shows us the monstrous truth: the SAC has brought forward the lake-cleaning. This year they'll do it at the beginning of April: in six days, to be exact.

There's a sudden weakness rising in me that feels like bile; it's misting up my eyes and I need to turn on the windscreen wipers. I sit down, probably looking rather desolate. The youngsters watch me, their eyes wide, then Corsin comes over and takes me in his arms. At first I want to push him away, but as I look at him and he's just looking back nicely at me through his fun glasses, I give in. As I calm down a little the youngsters are listening to me carefully. I tell them about the foot, about the SAC, and about my plan. They nod and they look at each other and at me, and they say they'll help me. And then they say they're my friends now. We arrange to meet tomorrow: same time, at the jetty.

I feel surprisingly euphoric as I walk away from the youngsters, knowing I've now got loyal support to back up my old bones. I get into my rubber-legged stride again and walk coolly past the little SAC clubhouse. I meet the duck by the exit. Normally I'd hiss an insult at him, but I'm in such a good mood that I just say a polite hello.

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There's mist over the lake and it's drizzling. Now I could really use the duck, he's just staring blankly at me again, of course. I could drown that stupid animal in the lake, but I pull myself together and behave nicely, as the thought of having helpers and companions has grown on me. I also get the feeling the duck might know something, maybe even the whole story, as he's always in the park – he sees everything. I have a strong suspicion that this could be true, even though he always acts as if he only cares about himself. So I try a bit of flattery and some serious duck buttering up. I'll go the whole hog: a little nod, a bow, nothing but the best for His Majesty the Duck.

There's a reason for my overly desperate behaviour: the foot's gone. Or at least it's not where it was before; I've combed through all the bulrushes at the back. I was the comb, and a fine-toothed one at that. And the bulrushes were the puzzle's hair. You'd have to pull out each hair one by one to make the park hurt so much it would tell me what was going on with the foot. So now I'm by the bushes; it's the afternoon. That's what the sundial I wear round my neck says. I made my sundial myself when I was with the Native Americans ten years ago. I taught myself almost everything, and I'll work out what the criminal machinations are that reign in this park, and then I'll get them, I'll trip up those machinations, and I'll get hold of them and they'll be in awe of me and they'll say, 'Gerhard, Inspector, you've won, you sly fox.' Because that's what I am.

This sly fox is combing through the entire park and the duck is waddling alongside.

Now it's really starting to rain. My umbrella's broken; normally I'd stay at home and solder it back together as I haven't got another one yet. But it's different now. Without something to protect me, I'd be exposed to acid rain; it's already eroded three hairs, I could feel it happening. I quickly go in the shop selling exotic vegetables and take

one of their pale blue plastic bags. I put it on and sculpt it into protective headgear. The shop assistant laughs and gives a thumbs-up sign. I hoof it out of there.

Back to the crime scene. I have a relatively peaceful afternoon. The SAC stay inside their clubhouse on account of the rain.

The youngsters aren't here. I'm disappointed. I'm more than disappointed; it makes me sad, things like that.

They always say young people are good for nothing. But I thought people only said that because they were youngsters themselves when they were younger. I, for one, didn't enjoy being young; the teacher was always shouting at me, but that doesn't make me want to start shouting at youngsters.

Apart from Kevin. But he has a vicious nature. Once I saw him kick the duck. I almost felt sorry for the duck.

The rain keeps making my magnifying glass wet. The SAC lot have put some hard rock music on in the little clubhouse. They're all indoors doing nothing; no one cares about anything. As for me, I'm creeping around in the mud with the duck, getting filthy, trying to solve a crime – and where's my thanks? No one ever thanks me. I act on behalf of the world, while the world does nothing and laughs at me. They all make a monkey out of me – I'm always the monkey.

I realise there's no one left for me but the duck. The whole thing makes me utterly miserable.

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But then, after all, the duck did tell me an exciting little story. The way I see it, it all stinks of shit, and especially the SAC clubhouse; that much is clear. For now, I'll stay away from the park today and tomorrow, because their lordships will be making a scene there when they climb in the lake acting all self-important with their rakes.

No, I'll stay at home in my bolthole and prepare my coup. I've got enough to go on with, after what the duck told me. I'm intensifying my daily rhythm in preparation. I've moved on from thyme tea to sage. It'll give me the strength I need.

In the mornings I'm always awake before the alarm goes off; I always have to lie back again and keep my eyes shut so the clock doesn't notice. No matter what's going on with the lake, the foot and everything else, you can't mess around with your alarm clock. After that, I listen to the radio and have my tea. I gargle the last two sips and spit them out of the window. Who knows? Maybe I'll hit one of the thugs from the criminal gang.

And here's what the duck told me: the youngsters didn't let me down. They were silenced. And it was Blüehler who did it. It all makes sense. You might as well say all roads lead to Blüehler.

The youngsters told me they'd help me. They meant straight away. I feel sad when I think they were waiting for my orders.

That same night, the youngsters tried to sort it out on their own. They wanted to wait in the building site until the park was empty. But the light was still on in the clubhouse. The girl went up and peeked through the little window. There was Patrick,

drunk and asleep in the armchair in front of the club TV, which was playing Scorpions' 'Wind of Change'. The girl quietly beckoned so the others would know the SAC didn't pose a threat. They climbed over the fence in the dark. Corsin was left hanging by one of the wheels of his roller skates. There is evidence everywhere that testifies to the events – the duck showed me.

Then the girl with the pink hair tried to get hold of the foot with a branch. It didn't work – I could've told her that. She got down on her belly and slid forward so she could reach the foot.

Meanwhile the three lads and Corsin were searching for the body in the bushes. As Corsin had trouble on the grass with his roller-skates, on top of the fact they were all really dopey from the jazz cigarettes, he kept falling over and the others had to keep helping him up – and then the girl fell in the lake. I could've seen it coming. Judging from her age, she could almost be my daughter, if I'd had children.

And the girl couldn't swim in the lake, because she was in shock, and she couldn't cry out either. And when the lads fished her out and she lay in Corsin's lap, Corsin was crying, really crying. Because the girl couldn't speak at all: she now had an even bigger shock, and the others did too. There were countless glistening, thick, slimy worms wriggling and writhing all over her body, over and under her sopping wet clothes. Leeches. Her entire little body was shivering, and the leeches were being shaken about so it looked as if they were shivering a bit too, while they were crawling about and attaching themselves to her.

It affected the duck so much he had to turn away. He'd been standing there the whole time, behind a sparse bush of bullrushes, and he saw everything in the pale moonlight.

I need a sip of sage. Since I heard the story, I've been mixing a little whisky into it. I call it whisky because that's what inspectors say, like in Friedrich Glauser's *The Chinaman*.

And then in the dark the duck heard Grimsel coming, thankfully. The duck didn't think 'thankfully', as he and Grimsel aren't exactly the best of friends. It's me thinking that. But then again maybe not, because that fat Blüehler came trotting along behind him. Blüehler went up to the youngsters. And Grimsel drove away the duck so he couldn't tell me anything else.

To sum up: what we know is that the youngsters and the foot have gone missing since Blüehler was with the youngsters. I wouldn't want to claim that Blüehler's the prime suspect, but she does have connections with the SAC, and that alone brings her under suspicion. So, there we have it. The duck and I have agreed that Grimsel should be the next to be questioned, by me, because the duck and Grimsel simply don't get on. The problem is that Grimsel is completely under Blüehler's spell. He would never betray her. The only option is a full-on frontal attack.