

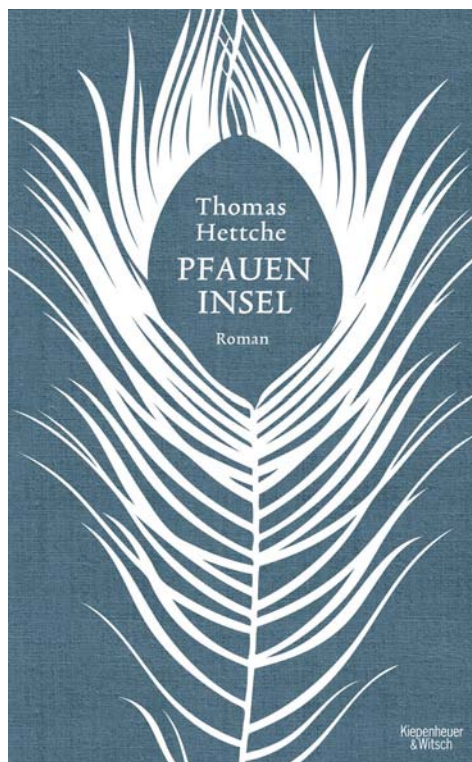
English sample translation

PFAUENINSEL

(Peacock Island)

A novel by Thomas Hettche

Translated by Anthea Bell



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Chapter One

The Word Spoken By The Dead Queen

The young queen simply stood there for a moment, waiting until her eyes were used to the woodland twilight. Just now she had been playing a ball game in the sunny meadow, the English game played with little wooden mallets that the king liked so much. The wallpaper for their castle in Paretz was also made by an Englishman, who had his manufactory in the Scheunenviertel district of Berlin, and the billiard table in Paretz had come straight from London. She thought she knew why the king adored everything that came from the British Isles: it was because he could not admit to himself how much he loved this island.

The island, which on maps looks like a fish, or a whale beating its flippers and bucking wildly, seems for some reason or other to be stranded at this place in the water of the river Havel, where it meanders particularly slowly, widening and then narrowing again, almost making one forget that every river has a source and a mouth. As if time itself went astray here, the Havel eddies around the island, mingling past and future as it pleases, for while it links the water-meadows of the Spreewald with those of the Elbe, at this spot its water seems to stand still in a chain of dark lakes, losing itself under a shady roof of the leaves of durmast oak, white elm, and beech trees – in riverside woods, on marshy land where alders grow, under grey willows.

In spring, celandines and marsh marigolds flower here, followed later in the year by marsh calla, yellow iris and purple loosestrife. Broad, impenetrable reed beds, with countless birds nesting in them, encircle the low-lying banks of the island. All these natural features date from the Ice Age, and are the terminal moraine formations of a glacial valley. Nothing on Peacock Island is firmly rooted in its time; every story really starts long before its beginning. The queen took a deep breath. Where was the ball?

As well as the children and their governesses, the little court that had come here today for the first time since its return from exile consisted only of two ladies-in-waiting, Countesses Tauentzien and Truchsess-Waldenburg, the princes' tutor Ancillon and Wrangel, His Majesty's aide-de-camp. Tomorrow von Hardenberg, who was still banished from court, was expected to arrive for a secret meeting to discuss Napoleon's recent demand: he wanted Prussia to cede him Silesia, as a substitute for

war reparation payments of nearly a hundred million francs, a sum that the country could not raise. Today, however, they were enjoying springtime, strolling on the island, talking, and refilling silver goblets with iced lemonade, because the weather was unusually hot for a day in May. No one had noticed exactly where the leather ball, struck with a cry of glee by Princess Alexandrine, barely seven years old, went when it disappeared into the undergrowth. So before anyone else volunteered to go in search of it, the queen herself, laughing, left the sunlit turf and slipped into the shade of the trees.

As if she had stepped past a curtain and into another world, all was suddenly silent around her, except for the quiet humming of weary insects. She was surprised to feel her skin burning from the sunlight and the exertion of the game. All the same, the queen adjusted her shawl, which was made of the same thin, almost transparent gauze as her dress, to cover her throat. The dress itself was white and short-sleeved, with a low neckline, and was held in only by a blue silk ribbon below her breasts.

A queen – what is a queen? A fairy-tale figure, we think, yet real life pulsed in this young woman's throat and fluttered over her cheeks in the sultry shade of the trees, wrapped close around her like the word describing her. Spoken aloud, it is as if her person melted into it, just as her figure merged with the dark shadows of that grove. Yet it is we who endow her with all that the term suggests to our minds while we watch her, murmuring the word silently to ourselves. A queen, a queen. We gawp at her shamelessly, and our imagination moves over her figure just as indiscreetly. What is a queen? Where does that word take us? We think we know exactly, but if we dwell on it for a moment we realize that we know nothing. Did they know better in those days? Was the word really just any other word, like soldier or doctor? We can't tell. Everything or nothing is a fairy tale. If we today could not even say what the term, spoken in all seriousness, really means, then everything or nothing is a fairy tale. A queen, a castle, an island. A ball. And another word will be necessary in a moment, also a fairy-tale word, but in this case repellent and disgusting, yet springing just as inevitably to the lips as the one describing the young woman there. The question will be where it leads us.

On this sultry day of early summer, it has led her into the twilight, where the sweet aroma of warm, fleshy leaves mouldering in the undergrowth caught her nostrils. She began looking for the ball, and saw it at once, bright white against the trunk of an old oak, half caught in the gnarled roots, half hidden by a fern. But when

she bent down and was about to reach for it, the figure of a small boy suddenly emerged from the shade of the trunk. He was quite close, staring at her, and she knew at once that there was something wrong about him.

In alarm, the queen called to the boy, asking who he was and what he was doing here. She spoke, as always when she was agitated, in the soft singsong accent of her South Hessian home, an accent that never sounded really sharp, and the child, whom she took for perhaps four or five years old, answered her entirely unabashed. But almost as soon as he opened his mouth the queen, now truly horrified by what she heard, let out a cry that she could suppress only with difficulty, and flinched away. For out of the child's body came the deep voice of a grown man, as inappropriate as the voice of a ventriloquist, speaking in a tone that was both civil and eerie, and giving a name that the queen, however, failed to take in at all. For now she also saw what it was about the figure that had frightened her at first sight. That broad, somehow sunken nose, like an animal's snout. The large, domed forehead that at first glance, but only then, reminded an observer of a small child. In addition, short hands reminiscent of a mole's paws dangled beside the thick-set body. All of it made the queen shudder so much that, to silence the uncanny creature, she flung a word at him and then, horrified by herself, clapped her hand to her mouth.

When the boy saw how badly frightened his queen was by the answer he had tried to give, in as friendly a tone of goodwill as possible, and observed the revulsion in her eyes as they moved over him, he uttered a terrible howl, turned and disappeared into the undergrowth. Less than a minute later, while the queen was still staring after the boy with her heart in her mouth, the whole troop of her children broke through the bushes, laughing. First came fourteen-year-old Fritz in his uniform, closely followed by Wilhelm and Charlotte, behind them Prince Carl, holding hands with Alexandrine, the princess who had struck that unlucky blow. However, little Ferdinand, while the older children were calling out to their mother – where was she, had anything happened? – was the first to see the leather ball. Shouting with delight, he wriggled past the legs of his brothers and sisters, picked it up, laughing, and ran back to the meadow and their father, brandishing the ball above his head in triumph.

What was the matter, Charlotte quietly asked, because she thought her mother suddenly looked unwell, pale and drained of strength. Places evoke much the same feelings in us as people do, we feel confidence in a landscape and a friend alike; a

face seen for the first time either pleases or does not please us. In certain places, we sense distrust and fear like almost intolerable physical proximity, and that proximity does not need to have eyes and a face. The queen heartily disliked this island, and although her children surrounded her, looking at her uncertainly, she could not tear her eyes away from the dark shadows into which the creature had disappeared – the creature at which she had shot that one word like an arrow hitting its mark and still left sticking in the wound. With a weary, resigned movement of her hand, she urged her children back out into the bright, warm sunlight of Peacock Island. She was visiting it that day for the last time in her life. Barely eight weeks later, on 19 July 1810, Queen Luise of Prussia was dead.

But the dwarf ran. It was a dwarf, yes. The word has to be spoken now, at the risk that it may appear to us as reassuring as any other word, which would be entirely wrong. For the dwarf was running away from nothing but a word, with his own howl ringing in his ears, and with it the sound of that word spoken by the queen that he could not escape. Yet he knew the island better than anyone else, better than Fintelmann the court gardener, better even than Kriepe the huntsman, who with his dog routed him out of the thickets now and then. The castle was to the south-west, surrounded by the castle meadow with the bowling alley and the swings. The warden's house was near the landing-stage. In the middle of the island grew a lightly spaced wood of old oaks and groves of beech trees, a wilderness where you could lose yourself. In this wood there was a farmhouse, and to the north-east a dairy built in the form of a Gothic ruin. There were meadows for the cattle, a carp pond, fields of rye, potatoes, oats and clover. Countless paths led through the undergrowth, and with his little body Christian Friedrich Strakon, for that was the dwarf's name, could go anywhere he liked.

He ran along the bank of the island to the Parschenkessel, the large bay at the far end of it, and after a while his howling stopped gushing from his mouth like blood from a wound. But the barb of the arrow was still in him. There was a little hollow in the sandy ground near the bay, and a roof of turf over it that he had built last year for himself and his little sister Marie, who was waiting there now for him to tell her about the queen. Since coming to the island four years ago Maria Dorothea Strakon, known to everyone as Marie, had borne the title of *châtelaine* of the castle, and on this day she had wanted nothing more fervently than to be able to pay her respects to the queen at long last.

While the court was still in exile, there had been no opportunity to do so, and her disappointment at not being summoned to the castle today had been all the greater. Christian stopped to get his breath back. It took him some time. The bulrushes, still grey from winter, stood whispering in the water, their flower spikes black and dried, with a few ducks swimming among them. He watched a swan as it swam up, an image of stately calm, and began to preen its plumage with careful sweeping movements of its beak. Then the dwarf bent down and slipped in under the roof of turves.

“Well? Is she as beautiful as everyone says? And the king? Tell me, Christian! What are they doing? Tell me what her dress is like!”

Marie, born in the same year as the century, looked at her brother wide-eyed. She was wearing her most beautiful dress, brushed and ironed days ago for this occasion. Now, in the middle of the leaves and roots here on the banks of the water, she looked, as she probably knew, both sad and inappropriately clad. Christian crouched down beside her and put the black hair that she had combed for longer than ever this morning back from her face.

Like everyone who looked at his little sister, to be sure, he saw the flaws of the stunted growth that kept further disfiguring her childish head as time passed, making her high forehead bulge where it met her hairline, while beneath it her broad saddle-back nose had a turned-up tip that bore no resemblance to a child’s delicate little nostrils. He knew that she waddled when she walked because her legs were already beginning to grow crooked. He knew Marie’s figure as well as his own. But he also saw in Marie’s eyes, under the heavy arches of her brows, the curiosity and affection that she bent on all she saw. He knew her mouth that laughed so readily. He knew how carefully and lovingly her stubby fingers touched everything. How clever she was for her age. To him, she was beautiful.

He patiently described the ladies’ dresses to her, in particular the queen’s, he told her about the king’s uniform, and the strange game that the court had been playing on the meadow by the castle. Last of all he told her about his meeting, and because he couldn’t bring himself to lie to her he repeated what the queen had said. And so, finally, the word spoken by the queen struck Marie too, the arrow that was to take effect at a distance for so long, for many years after the queen’s death, for all the rest of the little girl’s life.

Monster. With a pitiful whimpering like the cry of a beaten animal, Marie freed herself from her brother's embrace. The word hurt more than anything that anyone had ever said to her. She watched, helplessly, as the sun kindled the horizon above Sacrow while it slowly set on the opposite bank of the Havel. Christian kissed and caressed her, and she let him. A monster. She tried to shake the word off as if it were a troublesome insect, but she couldn't. Monster. Monster. Monster. So that was why she hadn't been summoned.

They might call her the châtelaine here, but that was only a masquerade in the toy world of Peacock Island, like everything else on it, like the farm where it didn't matter how much milk the cows gave or how much wool the sheep produced, everything was just a masquerade, make-believe like the walls of the castle, which were made not of stone but of painted boards. She was châtelaine, thought Marie, beginning to cry, only in this world, a world that was a lie, while in the real world she was a monster. And she had always known it. The years on the island had only soothed that knowledge, putting it to sleep and making her feel that the way she looked might be all right after all.

No one on the island had ever wanted her and her brother to grow, and no one had ever measured them. Once, when they lived in Rixdorf, first their father and then, when he didn't come home, their grandmother had measured them almost every day. In her mind's eye she could still see the notches in the doorpost; after a while no more were added. Because they stayed small. And because their father was dead. Sometimes Christian used to take hold of her ankles in bed in the morning and pull her legs, only in fun, to be sure, but Marie had always sensed that she and he should both have been different, and she didn't remember having been happy at the time.

All that had changed one morning, in a bright, sunny room in Potsdam and with great excitement, with knee-breeches and the white silk stockings of court dress. Grandmother, both hands on Marie's shoulders, had made her come forward. So her father had been a soldier, had he, and had fallen fighting? Marie had sensed Grandmother nodding. Her mother? No one knew anything about a mother. Grandmother had given her a little push, and the king had patted her head. Was she really, he asked, going to stay as small as that? Yes, certainly, her brother was just the same. Marie still remembered the collar of a uniform that stood tall and firm like a cylinder on the wearer's shoulders. Above it, there had been a head that spoke when

she was taken by the hand and led away. With her other hand, she was holding her brother's. She lost sight of Grandmother, and never saw her again.

They walked fast through corridors and rooms, then along a damp passage. Someone picked her up by the waist and lifted her into a boat rocking on the water, and mid-day broke over them both. The daylight was so bright. The men rowing them pulled their oars in silence; eel fishermen standing in their boats turned to look. Christian had shown her a cormorant. The sky above the Jungfernsee shimmered on the banks, and the tall trees, so deep a green that the colour seemed to drip from them, bent low over the ground, coming closer and closer as the river Havel narrowed. And then she had seen the island for the very first time. Adorned by its tall trees, it came close, like a mast-high ship itself, with the two towers of the castle being its white look-out post. Her heart beat wildly because she was so happy at that moment, feeling perfectly sure at once that, given the way she was made, she could belong only here. And at the same moment, for the first time in her life, she had heard a peacock's cry.

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Marie was six years old; it was the first morning after her first night on Peacock Island, and the quiet, gentle voice belonged to the little boy sitting beside her in his child's chair.

"In the story that Mama always reads me," he said softly, "St Brendan travels to the end of the world in his boat."

All the inhabitants of the warden's house had gathered around the large dining-room table: the court gardener Ferdinand Fintelmann and his sister-in-law Luise Philippine, née Rabe, who had been living here with her three sons since separating from her husband; the assistant gardener Albert Niedler, apprenticed to Fintelmann; and Mahlke, the tutor whom Fintelmann had engaged to teach the children. Now, as royal wards, Christian Friedrich and Maria Dorothea Strakon had joined the rest. Marie's eyes went excitedly from one to another of the company, and above all kept returning to the mother of the three boys, whom she watched in amazement as she cut bread for her children, wiped their mouths, steadied their cups when they looked like falling over, and rose to her feet to pick up the smallest, still a baby, when he began crying. Once again she heard the clear, soft voice right beside her.

“Then someone no larger than a thumb meets St Brendan, and that person is so small that he swims inside a leaf. He has a little bowl in one hand and a slate pencil in the other. He keeps dipping the slate pencil in the sea, and letting water drip off it into the bowl. And when the bowl is full, he pours the water away and begins all over again.”

The mother turned in anger, and her pale cheeks flushed red with embarrassment. “Gustav, keep quiet!”

Marie, surprised, heard herself replying. “Well? What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It’s a thumbling,” explained the little boy, “and he’s telling St Brendan that the Lord God has given him the task of measuring the water in the sea until the Day of Judgement.”

“Gustav!” said his mother again. She came over to the table and laid a hand apologetically on Marie’s head. Thumbling was a word that Marie had never heard before. What, she wondered, is a thumbling? Am I one too, a girl thumbling from the end of the world? It was a long time before she dared to look at the boy, and whenever she thought of that moment later she remembered the friendly smile that Gustav had given her.

“Can you read yet?” he asked curiously.

Surprised by that question, indeed terrified of being found wanting, she shook her head vigorously. All was lost, in spite of the boy’s friendliness. She hadn’t yet learned to read, and at the same moment that filled her with panic, because she felt so grateful to him. It was as if he had touched her in a place that wanted to be touched. And he had done it gently. Only he’ll never speak to me again, she thought, because I can’t read. She waited, in case he might perhaps say something else, but there was silence, while her fear grew ever greater. And then, suddenly, something like a drop of warmth, channelled into her from who knew where, spread the soft certainty through her that it didn’t matter.

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When at last Countess Voss, a lady of advanced years who had been senior lady-in-waiting to the court for decades, had Marie summoned to see her, the child had been on Peacock Island for two years. One of the liveried servants came over the meadow

to the warden's house and fetched her. The royal family was not expected until that afternoon; the senior lady in waiting, together with the cook and the domestic staff, had arrived in advance, and when Marie was taken to the countess she was sitting in the room reserved for her alone, directly adjoining the entrance hall, in her armchair with her back to the window and in front of the flowered wallpaper. She wore a dress of blue shot-silk damask with a pattern of white flowers, its old-fashioned hooped skirt spreading wide around the chair; its sleeves left her forearms bare, and like the low neckline they were trimmed with white lace. Marie saw the loose flesh quivering as the old lady beckoned her closer with an energetic gesture.

What impressed her most, however, was the countess's wig; Countess Voss was probably the only woman at court still to wear one, although only a year ago she had been a melancholy witness when the young king cut off his pigtail and gave it to Queen Luise. Marie, unacquainted with such things, did not know how to account for such a towering abundance of grey and obviously powdered hair, its delicate little curls harmonizing so well with the old lady's papery skin. In her amazement, it was some time before she noticed the senior lady-in-waiting's clouded gaze as the countess, for her part, scrutinized Marie, to the sound of the mantelpiece clock ticking on the chest of drawers. But at last, when she became aware of the silence in the room and was alarmed by it, she asked the senior lady-in-waiting what a thumbling was.

"Approche-toi!"

Marie obeyed, in alarm, and indeed her question seemed to annoy the old lady, for a white hand freckled with brown age spots closed so tightly on her forearm that Marie's face twisted with pain.

"Tell me your name."

"I am Maria Dorothea Strakon, madame."

"On t'apprend le français?"

"Oui, nous l'apprenons chez Monsieur Mahlke."

"Quel âge as-tu?"

"J'ai huit ans, madame."

"And you are the new young châtelaine on Peacock Island?"

Marie nodded proudly.

The gaze of Countess Voss, who as a young woman had suffered a good deal from the attentions of the late king, and was then a close confidante of his son Friedrich Wilhelm II from his childhood on, rested on Marie for a long time. The old

lady's eyes were dim, covered as if with a milky haze; her once finely curved mouth, now fallen in, twitched spasmodically as if she were chewing something. Poor thing, thought the senior lady-in-waiting, and felt no revulsion, only pity for the little girl. Marie reminded her of times when figures like this dwarf child had not been unusual at court; on the contrary, royal personages boasted of having them. But nowadays? What did the young king want this child for?