



Isabel Bogdan

The

Peacock

translated by Annie Rutherford

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Isabel Bogdan was born in Cologne and studied English and Japanese. She is an enthusiastic Hamburg-dweller, reader, writer and translator into German (including Jane Gardam, Jonathan Safran Foer, Nick Hornby, Jasper Fforde). Her first book *Sachen Machen* came out in 2012, followed in 2016 by *The Peacock*, and in 2019 by *Laufen*. She has won prizes for her translating, her writing and the online interview project “Was machen die da?”

Annie Rutherford champions poetry and translated literature in all its guises. She works as Programme Co-ordinator for StAnza, Scotland’s international poetry festival, and as a writer and translator. Her published translations include German/Swiss poet Nora Gomringer’s *Hydra’s Heads* (Burning Eye Books, 2018) and Belarusian poet Volha Hapeyeva’s *In My Garden of Mutants* (Arc, 2021). She co-founded the literary magazine *Far Off Places* and Göttingen’s Poetree festival.

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For Jeannie and Hector Maclean

One of the peacocks had gone mad. Or maybe he just couldn't see very well. At any rate, he suddenly regarded anything blue and shiny as competition on the marriage market.

Luckily, there were very few blue and shiny things in the little glen at the foot of the Highlands. There were fields and meadows and trees and altogether a great deal of green, and there was the heather. And any number of sheep. The only shiny blue things which occasionally strayed there were the holidaymakers' cars. Lord and Lady McIntosh had converted the former farm buildings, barns and anything else vaguely suitable which belonged to their estate into holiday cottages, so that the old place recovered at least some of the money it gobbled up. The oldest parts of the castle presumably dated back to the seventeenth century, when the castle had been built, and there had been various annexes and extensions over the following centuries. There hadn't always been enough money for ongoing modernisations, and this remained the case today. The house cost money. The plaster would flake off the facade and need replacing, and then a water pipe would burst, or the roof would need repairing. Lady Fiona mainly repaired the electrics herself, because hardly any electricians nowadays can still cope with 110 volts or deal with the old fuses. The heating costs regularly brought the McIntoshes out in a sweat, which is more than could be said of the temperatures in

the house. The ground floor was paved with flagstones, so it was never particularly warm, even in hot summers, and hot summers were rare. In winter it was even colder. There was a central heating system which didn't deserve the name, and so most rooms were simply cold. Only the kitchen was always pleasant, with a fire burning constantly in the old Aga. Almost all year round, the Laird and Lady spent their evenings by the fireplace in the library, where they read, worked or watched DVDs. In winter they sometimes wore woolly hats to bed. They didn't mind, they were used to it. When they were frozen through, they took a bath or got into the hot tub outside on the great lawn.

Lord McIntosh sometimes joked that he might as well go ahead and try to insulate the house with banknotes. The Laird was a classics scholar and didn't understand much about buildings. The Lady was an engineer and understood rather more, despite working for a wind turbine company. They'd both mastered the basics of addition and subtraction. They weren't poor, they had more than enough to live on but not enough for a thorough renovation of the old property.

The cottages had only slightly more modern facilities – they were somewhat better insulated and had carpets and low ceilings, so they were considerably easier to heat. And of course, every bed had an electric blanket. It was really quite cosy in the former gatehouse a mile and a half away by the entrance to the drive, in the gardener's house on the other side of the wee river, in the washhouse half a mile up the glen, in the former stables beyond the woods, and in the other cottages dotted around further away in the glen, next to gravel roads or at the ends of muddy tracks. You visited your next-door neighbours by car here, and if you were drunk on the way home, it didn't matter too much because you were unlikely to meet another car or get pulled over. If you landed in a ditch, there were enough tractors which could pull you out again. The so-called village was made up of a handful of houses, a tiny church, and a telephone box nobody had used for years.

Renting out the cottages was going quite well, people loved the peace and quiet and the nature. Getting away from everything, no phone signal, no TV, just the murmur of the stream. They mostly came in the summer, often middle-aged couples who worked long hours back home and would mainly go for walks here, or families with children. Life was less hurried here than in the city. The nearest town was twelve miles away.

In a fit of exuberance one day, Lord McIntosh had purchased five peacocks, three females and two males; he had imagined how pretty it would be when the males strutted around the great lawn in front of the house, fanning out their trains. The less attractive females were to stay quietly in the background, discreetly giving the males a reason to compete and fan their tail feathers in the first place. That's how he'd pictured it. Lord McIntosh was very keen on animals in general, but he didn't understand very much about them. He hadn't counted on the peacocks widening their radius of activity so much that they generally weren't to be seen at all. He also hadn't counted on the fact that, instead, they could be heard very well indeed, their cries echoing through the glen, so that it sounded a bit like a jungle. But the McIntoshes got used to that, and on the whole the peacocks were left to themselves and did as they pleased. And they only fanned their trains during mating season in the spring; after that, they shed the long tail feathers. These only grew back the following spring, which impressed Lady Fiona all over again each year. Nature really was full of marvels! Once a year the peacocks bred somewhere in the wood and had young, most of which didn't survive. Each year one or two made it, and by now there were at least four males and six females, although no one knew the exact number. The Laird only fed the animals occasionally, mainly in the winter when they couldn't find much to eat. Occasionally one of them froze to death somewhere in the woods, and the McIntoshes didn't really understand why, because the peacocks normally gathered in the shed behind the house where they were fed and where it

was considerably warmer. The peacocks came to accept the two dogs, Albert and Victoria, or rather the other way round: Albert realised at some point, firstly, that the peacocks fought back and, secondly, that he wasn't allowed to treat them as toys anyway, and Victoria was too small and too old to even think of such a thing. At some point the peacocks even settled on the division of feed and on social niceties with the cantankerous old goose, and after a while, all of the animals got on and basically left one another alone. They lived peacefully alongside each other and the holidaymakers were delighted no matter what.

Until one of the peacocks went mad. Or couldn't see very well. Afterwards, of course, it was impossible to find out what the problem was and when it had begun. At any rate, when Mr and Mrs Bakshi arrived at the end of August, nobody could have suspected a thing. The Bakshis had rented one of the cottages for three weeks. They were in the former washhouse and were enchanted and enraptured, saying quite often how good they had it and how delightful everything was and how lucky they were to have ended up here. In all honesty, the cottage wasn't exactly luxurious. There was no shower, just a badly insulated bathtub in which the water always went cold immediately. In the kitchen, the floor sloped so much that the Bakshis felt like they were on a ship the first few days, for the ground was never quite where they expected it to be. But it didn't take long before they got used to the fact that the water never fully ran out of the sink, because the plughole wasn't at the lowest point. Mrs Bakshi could cope with the fact that the oil always ended up on one side of the pan – she found this charming and enchanting too. At some point, they even thought it handy that every grape they dropped rolled into the same corner.

Once a day, Mr Bakshi hosed down the paving slabs in front of the cottage to wash away the goose muck. For reasons no one understood, the goose's favourite place to be was right in front

of their door. Mr Bakshi was impressed each day by how much mess a single goose could produce. Lady Fiona McIntosh was a wee bit embarrassed that the goose had to choose the area by the washhouse door, of all places, as her new favourite spot, but the Bakshis assured her it didn't bother them at all. Really, the Lady said, a goose like that wasn't meant to be alone, it wasn't good for the creature. But she didn't want to keep acquiring new geese *ad infinitum*, just to make sure no one goose was ever alone. So perhaps the goose was just looking for a bit of company.

The Bakshis spent their three weeks mainly doing nothing. They went on a lot of walks – down the drive, past the little gatehouse and through the village, along the side of a field (home, surprisingly enough, to two alpacas), over the small footbridge across the river, back along the riverbank to the next bridge but one, and then back to the house. Or they went up to the left behind the house, passed the ruined chapel, which was hidden somewhat behind a dense thicket of trees, crossed a field of cows, and then arced up to the driveway and made their way back from there. On the way, they picked blackberries or stopped to enjoy the views of the hilly landscape and the Highlands up to the north. They opened gates and stepped in cowpats, climbed over fences and stepped in sheep droppings; they rinsed their shoes in the stream which ran through the valley and washed their hands in it. They marvelled at the sheer number of rabbits, went birdwatching and once even saw a magnificent stag. On a particularly warm day, Lady Fiona showed them a place hidden by trees behind a field of cows where the stream was wider, forming a natural pool which they could swim in. It was cold but beautiful – by swimming gently against the current, you could stay in the same place. The Bakshis laughed with pleasure, dried themselves off swiftly afterwards and got dressed.

Otherwise they read and they watched the goose and the peacocks strutting across the lawn. Mr Bakshi crept persistently

after the peacocks trying to photograph them, which turned out to be bafflingly tricky, and Mrs Bakshi crocheted a blanket for the grandchild they were expecting soon, their first.

They were so delighted by everything that on their final evening they invited the McIntoshes to a farewell dinner in the wash-house, at which Mrs Bakshi served the Laird and Lady a spectacular chicken korma. It wasn't really the done thing to visit the cottages of paying guests, but since the death of the old Laird a few years ago, Hamish and Fiona McIntosh no longer stood on ceremony.

Nonetheless, Lord McIntosh wanted to first of all deal with some formalities that evening. The tourist board was carrying out a statistical survey and all holidaymakers were meant to fill in a questionnaire: how long they'd been in the area, how often they'd been before, how old they were, what sort of accommodation they'd stayed in and so on. A never-ending questionnaire, which Lady Fiona – as the Laird told the Bakshis – sometimes filled in herself, instead of bothering visitors with it. If needs be, she simply made something up. He didn't think much of this approach, he admitted, but his wife could be almost unstoppable sometimes and was very creative.

Well then, give it here, said Mr Bakshi, and took the questionnaire off the Laird. Mrs Bakshi said people wouldn't fill it in any more honestly than Lady Fiona anyway, so he needn't worry about it. She herself basically ticked whatever she found funniest in this sort of thing or wrote down some kind of nonsense. Lady Fiona McIntosh considered this sensible. The ladies felt they understood each other.

Mr Bakshi read out the questions and asked his wife why they had come here and what they had done during their stay. She asked what the options were; there, she said, *wildlife watching* – that sounded super, that's what they were here for! They really had seen an owl the other night, she said. Yes, the Laird

said, you saw them quite often here. And this, said Mrs Bakshi, *action and adventure*, another good one! He should tick that too. Indeed, Mr Bakshi told the McIntoshes, they had experienced both of these things that morning – plenty of *action and adventure* with *wildlife*, right here in the cottage.

That morning, they explained, they had been woken by a strange noise. Mrs Bakshi had thought it must be birds frolicking about outside on the windowsill, perhaps beating the glass with their wings while they, well, made little baby birds. She had got up and carefully drawn the curtains aside and indeed, there was a blue tit there – not outside the window though, but rather on the inside. It was fluttering against the windowpane in a desperate attempt to get out. The Bakshis asked themselves how the blue tit could have got in, all the windows had been closed overnight. Less for fear of birds than of midges. Lord McIntosh said that sometimes birds actually fell down the chimney and made quite a mess with all the soot they brought in with them. The blue tit looked quite clean though, the Bakshis said. Oh well, at any rate it had been inside, in their bedroom. Mrs Bakshi had pushed open the window, and the blue tit had understood pretty quickly, had fluttered onto the windowsill and then out into the woods. Mrs Bakshi had gone back to bed and left the window open to let in a bit of fresh air.

Not a particularly exciting story in itself, but an hour later they awoke to the same sound again. Stupid creature, flying right back in here, Mr Bakshi had grunted into his pillow. But this time it was a swallow, he told the McIntoshes, and tragically it had got stuck between the two panes of the opened window. It took quite a bit of effort to manoeuvre it out, for the creature had panicked, and when they moved the window, it just got its wings stuck even more. In the end, they used the handle of a wooden spoon to somehow push the bird – by now totally distressed – up between the windowpanes. Mr Bakshi was finally able to catch it and put it on the windowsill, where it flew away out into the

air – luckily it wasn't injured. But it really was peculiar, the Bakshis said, that two birds had behaved so strangely on one and the same morning, just flying into a human dwelling like that. They didn't normally do that.

Lord McIntosh told them that for a while now a pair of eagles had been nesting somewhere further up in the mountains and that occasionally you could see the eagles from here, mainly far away, high up in the sky. But it did sometimes happen that they came closer and then the birds in the glen always went quite mad. Perhaps that had been the case that morning. First a blue tit mysteriously getting into the house and then a swallow getting stuck between the windowpanes – birds didn't normally act that oddly.

And so the conversation rippled along and they talked about birds while eating Mrs Bakshi's delicious chicken korma. Mr and Mrs Bakshi found it all unbelievably interesting and wonderful to be so close to nature, and Hamish and Fiona were pleased their holidaymakers were so happy.

It was at the end of that evening that the peacock went crazy for the first time. Mr and Mrs Bakshi accompanied the McIntoshes to the door, and when they opened it, the light from the hallway fell on the Bakshis' car. It was metallic blue, glinted in the light and was, to put it mildly, not exactly a luxury vehicle. The four of them were standing by the door and exchanging courtesies when suddenly, as if out of nowhere, one of the peacocks lunged at the car and attacked the vehicle, crying loudly and beating its wings, hammering with a terrible clatter at the hood with its beak, and baffling and startling the McIntoshes just as much as the Bakshis. No one wants to mess with an angry peacock and this one was clearly quite furious. The ladies fled into the cottage and the men had them pass out a blanket, which they shook, yelling at the peacock. This apparently impressed him sufficiently and he flapped away.

