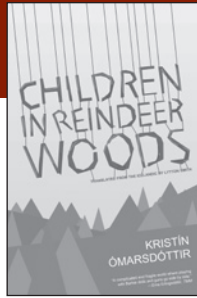


FROM CHILDREN IN REINDEER WOODS KRISTÍN ÓMARSÐÓTTIR



• The soldiers cross the green meadow. I. The sun is at its height. Setting down their packs and weapons, they remove their jackets and tie them around their sturdy soldiers' waists. Three together. Three white t-shirts and three green pairs of pants approaching a farm with a two-story house that rises from a huge nest of hedges and tall trees. A cow lows in the backyard. Four, five chickens waddle about the property. A dog gets to its feet and watches the garden gate open. Four children, an older woman, and a young man head out from the house with their hands clasped behind their necks. A moment later, a woman with a red tray comes out after them. A milk bottle, a silver coffee pot, three clean glasses, three cups, a knife stuck in a thick rye loaf. Butter and freshly-boiled eggs for the soldiers. A light breeze makes its way across the yard. One of the soldiers wipes his forehead. Another watches the third, who shakes himself, brushing off goose-bumps, or a thought. On the east side, beside the gate, a pebbledash table is set into the earth. The woman with the red tray heads there. The breeze tugs at the edge of her skirt. The people stand in front of the soldiers, who shuffle their feet in the gravel. One of the soldiers shoots the woman with the tray. The milk bottle and glasses shatter. The coffee pot clatters to the ground. Blood runs from the woman's eyes as she grips the tray tightly and falls; she lies face down in the grass as if resting peacefully on a pillow, and the blood leaks across it. The youngest child runs to her but is shot on the way. The cow lows in familiar fashion. The chickens hurry

over to look at the bodies. The soldier who fired lowers his weapon. The other two shoot the dog, the woman, the man, two more children. But the young girl is spared, seemingly without a thought. She lowers her arms to her sides. One soldier shoulders his weapon and takes one of the strutting chickens in his arms. "I've always wanted to hold a chicken," he confesses. The other two step cautiously inside the house, weapons raised. Army boots inside the house, bodies too. While he is examining the chicken, petting and caressing it, the girl steals under the bush near the garden gate. Into a curved tree bed. Leaves and branches cover the trees like a long grass skirt. "You smell very good, my hen. A much better scent than I expected a chicken would have. Mmm, my chick," the soldier says, pressing the tip of his nose against the hen's belly. The girl licks the salty earth, decaying leaves, mossy stones, the clods of earth. She stares out from her hiding place as the animal lover prods the chicken's belly, examines its eyes, opens its beak, and inspects the tiny tongue. No teeth. Then they call him into the house. The soldier disappears inside, the creature still in his arms. The girl pulls herself deeper into the bed on her stomach, the way reptiles move. The sun shifts. It's one o'clock.

•• The trees rustled, and the curtains on the upper story were drawn by the cord. Perhaps someone could have compared the billowing of the curtains to that of a pregnant

woman's dress. The cow in the backyard lowed like clockwork. The girl peered out from her hiding place. The chicken's clucking carried from the house. The chickens hadn't ever been invited inside, but this was a new era. Two more chickens strolled up to the doorstep. They finally had a chance to visit the humans' habitat. Just then the chicken inside cried out like she was about to be torn apart; there was an awful flapping of wings. The chickens hurried away. From the house, three gunshots resounded through the valley, as though the sound came from giant, well-positioned loudspeakers. One soldier dragged one of his bloody comrades across the threshold and laid him beside the other dead bodies. The cow lowed. He wiped his forehead with the back of his hand, disappeared inside and dragged out his other comrade, who was just as bloody. He wiped his forehead with the back of his hand. He went in and came back with the chicken in his arms. He moistened his handkerchief with spit and wiped splotches of blood from her feathers. He set the plump chicken down, uncoiled a yellow hose, connected it to the spigot, and turned on the faucet. There was a rustling on the ground as the cat came over to the girl, who suddenly felt her allergies prickling. The soldier set down the hose and went over to the bushes. The cat appeared from the bushes and nuzzled its head against his boots. "Here, pussy," said the soldier, taking the kitten in his arms. The girl was definitely definitely definitely about to sneeze, so she ate some soil.

[. . .]

The chicken followed him to the shed, where he kicked open the rusty door and got a shovel. He disappeared around a corner of the house, followed by the chicken, then reappeared and walked past the bush which stood against the garden wall—on the other side of which they had often sat in the grass to drink juice, eat cookies, and play ludo, nine men's morris, or backgammon. The chicken came back around the same corner of the house, and it took her a while, crossing the garden with smaller steps, neat chickensteps, to re-find her new friend.

Despite her restricted view, the girl could see the soldier studying part of the vegetable garden. He opened the greenhouse door, and the glass, which was too small for the frame, rattled. Beside the greenhouse grew tall, slender trees. He began to dig and shovel there. The chicken waddled around nearby. The other chickens approached, then retreated, approached again, retreated again. Done with the milk in the grass, the kitten prowled over to the girl, not interested in whether she'd like her allergies set off again; it wanted to make friends, to be affectionate towards her. Then the girl sneezed, and the kitten bounded all the way over to the soldier, who had in the meantime clambered down into the grave, which now came up to his waist. The mountain of used earth beside the greenhouse increased, and kittikins lay on the slope, watching the earth fall from the shovel onto a second mountain that was growing beside the first. ■