

# *a Peasant History*

*Peasant life and struggle  
in novels and films - worldwide*



*Jan Paul Smit*

*This is a webbook - go to:  
[www.peasantautonomy.org](http://www.peasantautonomy.org)*

**A Peasant History** leads us in 168 stories through the world's history, through the eyes of peasants.

Oppression, resistance, dreams of a small farm of one's own, the harsh realities of war and migration, deep sorrow over love lost, happiness from a fine harvest – all sorts of situations are addressed. We meet crop farmers, fishermen, folk heroes, farm girls, small children, old women, shepherds and pioneers. The whole many-coloured, diverse peasant world

unfolds before our eyes in stories of bygone times, the tumultuous twentieth century, or the most modern times. From Senegal to Australia and Hungary, from Turkey to Japan and Mexico.

Every story refers to a fine novel or movie film, so that you can continue reading or watching whenever you like. Next to every story you will find two large pictures, to make it easy to feel yourself in the area where the story takes place.

*“What a most splendid collection! Jan Paul Smit offers a kaleidoscopic image of peasant life over the centuries, and in various continents. At the same time the webbook is a vital reference work: it gives a useful overview of films, books and short stories that inform about peasant life. For enthusiasts, but also an information source for educators, which they wouldn't like to miss.” ~ Jan Douwe van der Ploeg, Professor of Agriculture, the Netherlands and China.*

*“A Peasant History is an impressive and original mosaic, linking peasant stories to movies and novels. It creates deep understanding of peasant life, and the many challenges that they face. Well worth to dive into, and get carried away.” ~ Henk Hobbelink, Coordinator GRAIN.*

*“A Peasant History is a fine and quite remarkable resource, showing just how patterns of rural life repeat and echo across the ages and over many different countries and agroecosystems. On the one hand, it is painful to see how little we might have learned in a thousand years; on the other it is touching to see humanity shine through so clearly. Highly recommended.” ~ Jules Pretty, Professor of Environment, England.*



Photo: Rikolto

My special thanks go to Marcia Tiede and Margaret Weidner for their careful correcting of the English stories. And to Jules Pretty for his encouragement.

To get the atmosphere of a story well, the corresponding pictures are indispensable.  
Therefore, go to [a \*Peasant History\* at www.peasantautonomy.org](http://www.peasantautonomy.org).

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## 1. Egypt – around 2050 BCE

### **The poor peasant and the magistrate**

“It is your duty to defend justice. But what are you doing? You allow injustice, you let it spread. It doesn't matter to you that a poor man is robbed. You represent the law, the administration, but you bring shame upon our beloved Pharaoh Nebkaure. I know quite well that you can have me whipped. But still I will not be quiet.”

Infuriated, the peasant is shouting in front of the magnificent official residence of the district magistrate. Two guards with lances look dispassionately straight ahead. A few passers-by stop to watch. Some are smiling, but most of them look serious and nod: the local rulers mess things up, and the poor are the victims.

A few days ago the poor peasant Khunanup has come to the city, Heracleopolis, to buy barley for his family. At home he has loaded up his two donkeys with everything from wine, salt, edible roots, beans, mint and anise, to a few pigeons and some wolf and jackal pelts to sell in the city.

At one point Khunanup walks on a narrow path between two barley fields. Some clothes are laid out to dry on the path. He asks the man sitting on the ground nearby to get them out of the way, since he can hardly walk through the barley with his donkeys. While Khunanup is trying to persuade the man, one of his donkeys takes a few bites of the grain. That's just what the man is waiting for. He jumps to his feet, and takes the donkeys from the peasant along with all his belongings on them, allegedly 'as compensation for the damage.' When Khunanup protests at the top of his voice, the man beats him. After that, the peasant goes to the magistrate Rensi to complain. However, he turns a deaf ear to him.

“Magistrate Rensi, son of Meru, why do you hide in your nice house? A just official would come to me, look in my eyes, and listen to me. He would show understanding, would put that hoodlum in custody, and restore justice. But you are no more than a crocodile, swimming in murky water, seeking your next victim. You disgust me.”

#### Source

*The Eloquent peasant* (around 1850 BCE), from an anonymous Egyptian writer, is a powerful, age-old story about injustice and protest.

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## 2. Nottinghamshire, England – 1195 – *film*

### **'The forest is large enough for a secret army'**

“Just my awful luck! I had just shot a deer in the middle of the forest, and here came a little band of nobles. Naturally, escorted by a group of soldiers, otherwise they don't dare to come here. I was seized, and they told me that I would be hanged, because poaching is punishable by death. Yes, for what are you not punished by death nowadays? Only for paying taxes, I think. Anything else is unlawful. Luckily, you just happened along. You have responded to that weasel of a soldier very nicely, and he feared your bow and arrow. I could see that.”



Sir Robin of Locksley, a young, cheerful, adventurous nobleman, has to smile. “What's your name, anyway?” “I am Much, the miller's son. Are you not Sir Robin, who is called 'Robin Hood', and who is skilled with bow and arrow? Yes, I know that poaching is illegal, but a man needs to eat. Sir Robin, our life has become hell, with that new, vicious King John. Nowadays, you have to pay a tax for everything, the soldiers harass everyone. At the slightest whim you are flogged, your eye is gouged out, or you are hung. No woman is safe. Everyone is fearful. If only our old King Richard would come back. Why did he find it so necessary to go on a crusade? He should have stayed and protected us. During his reign our life was good.”

“Listen, Much, King Richard will surely return. Then, we will oust King John. All of us together. I need your help, Much. Let all the villagers know that tomorrow night there will be a gathering by the big oak, you know. Take care that the soldiers don't notice it. Just whisper it around that the forest is large enough for a secret army of peasants and other villagers, of anyone who can fight. From now on we will shoot a soldier dead for every poor fellow who is mistreated or hung. From now on we will show no mercy to traitors. From now on we will take back all the taxes that have been extorted from us, and distribute it among the poor.”

#### Source

*The Adventures of Robin Hood* (1938) is a colourful action film from the American directors Michael Curtiz and William Keighley, based on the centuries-old legends of this folk hero.

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### **3. Mali – 13th century – film**

#### **Father and son**

Carefully Nianankoro takes the big calabash bowl with both hands. Slowly, he moves it back and forth, looking into the rippling water. Worriedly, he says, “Mother, Father is not far away.” The old woman looks at her son. “Come on, we need to get away, your father wants to kill you. You know that.” Nianankoro, a slender, dark young man, almost twenty years old, shakes his head. “No, I am no longer a child. I will not run away for him any more. I will go out to meet him.” “You must flee,” the old woman answers, “for ten years I have been fleeing with you, to protect you against your father. You are not a match for him. He is terrible, he is a monster.”

The father of Nianankoro is a great sorcerer with extraordinary powers. But he misuses his talents to dominate others, causing death and destruction. He hates the world, he hates people. And most of all, he hates his own son, because in a dream he has seen how he will stand up to resist him, once he has come of age – that there will be a dreadful battle, for which the outcome is uncertain.

“I will not run away from him again,” Nianankoro repeats. The old woman with her wrinkled face looks at her son searchingly. The time has come, she concludes. “Look, my child, I have for you this powerful amulet. Wear it around your neck, day and night. It will protect you against harm from your father. And here is a sacred crystal. Go through the land of the Fula, and take it to your uncle Djigui. He is the twin brother of your father. God has struck him with blindness, but he is a good man. He will explain to you how to defeat your father, how to return justice in this country.

### Source

The movie *Yeelen* (Light, 1987) is an epic masterpiece of the Malian director Souleymane Cissé.

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## **4. Karaburun, West Turkey – about 1400**

### **The poet dreams**

About 1930 Nâzim Hikmet is imprisoned, because he writes poems which make poor Turks enthusiastic and the government angry. It is already late, and Hikmet is the only one in the room who is still awake. He is reading a book about a peasant revolt at the end of the fourteenth century in the Karaburun region, which is nowadays in Western Turkey. His eyes are itching, he smokes one cigarette after another. He has to go to bed, but he has a splitting headache.

Then he hears a whispering voice, which chases away his headache: “Hikmet, don't you recognize me? I am the *Dervish* (monk with a long, white garb) from your book. This evening I take you with me.” A moment later Hikmet is on the rocks by the sea, just in front of the prison. The Dervish invites him into his small boat.

Shortly afterwards they arrive at Karaburun. Now it is about 1400. The farmer Börklüdje Mustafa, stocky, with massive shoulders, goes from village to village. He is a follower of sheikh Bedreddin, a genial old man with a big white beard. He wants to abolish the oppression of peasants by feudal lords.

“When I may use your property, you may use mine,” explains sheikh Bedreddin simply to the villagers. “Working together, harvesting together, eating together. Death to the lords.” The peasants are enthusiastic.

Hikmet and the Dervish notice that in the region of Börklüdje the figs are big and juicy; there the ears of grain are full and golden yellow, and a gentle, fresh wind is blowing. They arrive at the Fool's Forest, where hundreds of villagers have gathered. There is lots of activity, everyone walks around with weapons: cudgels, threshing flails, and sickles, but also swords. There are rumours going around that the sultan will send Prince Murat to put down the rebellion.

Then Hikmet feels a hand on his shoulder. Now it is again about 1930. When he opens his eyes he sees his prison-mate Sjekik. “You look so strange,” he says, “did you sleep well?” Hikmet tells the story of his night journey. A few moments later everyone in the room has heard the dream story. “You have to write a heroic poem about farmer Börklüdje and sheikh Bedreddin,” says Sjekik.

### Source

The *Epic of Sheikh Bedreddin* (1936), written by the Turkish poet Nâzim Hikmet, tells about a peasant rebellion from long ago in the form of a dream.

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## **5. A village on Java, Indonesia – early sixteenth century (1)**

### **Decline of the empire**

“Why do you pay taxes to the *Adipati* (ruler) of Tuban? What do you get in return for it?” Challengingly Rama Cluring looks around in the village hall of Awiskrambil. When nobody answers him, he continues: “Nothing at all. He will buy elephants for it. He only thinks about commerce and gold. He will bring you all down. Stop paying taxes!”

Then the criticism bursts out. “This is treason, this is revolt,” shouts the village head. “The *Adipati* is ruler by the grace of Hyang Widhi (the supreme god)” cries another one. “Go telling it in Tuban,” screams a wife. And another: “My dear *guru* (teacher), when a guard of the *Adipati* hears you, he will drag you into court.”

Rama Cluring sits motionless like a statue, with his white eyebrows, white moustache, white beard and white headband, and both his legs folded under himself. Then he lifts his right forefinger and all the audience become quiet. “It will not be the first time that the truth will be brought before the court,” he starts calmly, almost icily. “But we all know that the truth comes from Hyang Widhi. Truth cannot be judged. I speak in the name of Hyang Widhi and I speak the truth, nothing else. That is my duty.”

Rama Cluring is one of the many teachers who travel from village to village to speak to the people in the shadow of a big tree or in the village hall. “I will explain it to you once more,” he goes on, more friendly now. Then he starts telling about the golden age of the Majapahit empire with its visionary *mahapatih* (prime minister), Gajah Mada. He describes how later on the empire was undermined from inside, also by the *Adipati* of Tuban, and how it has crumbled into small principalities which are out for each other. Therefore they are an easy prey for the *Peranggi* (Portuguese), who are just at the point of bringing under their control Java and the other islands.

“The *Adipati* of Tuban has brought us prosperity and calm. Our children can grow up in peace”, puts in one of the villagers. Rama Cluring reacts furiously: “If the decline is not halted soon, and if you do not regain your sense of justice, and your self-respect quickly, a fire storm will spread death and destruction. That will happen sooner than you think now.”

Idayu nudges her friend Galeng and whispers “The *guru* has right.” But Galeng doesn't hear her, because he is absorbing the words of Rama Cluring so intently. “To restore the Majapahit empire, that's what we have to do,” he murmurs to himself.

#### Source

The book *Arus balik* (The current from the north, 1979) written by the Indonesian author Pramoedya Ananta Toer is a great history novel about the early sixteenth century. A few passages depict the village life.

Part 2: Challenging the sovereign - Tuban, Java, Indonesia – early sixteenth century (2), story 6.

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## **6. Tuban, Java, Indonesia – early sixteenth century (2)**

### **Challenging the sovereign**

Idayu sits on her knees in the dust. Humbly she bows her head deeply, touching the ground. She sits in

front of the *Adipati* (sovereign) of Tuban on his golden throne. Yesterday she became dance champion, and today she is laurelled at a great public festival. Friendly says the sovereign “Tell me your wish, my Idayu, darling of Tuban, and I will fulfil it.” The heralds loudly repeat his words to the people. Because she is the champion, Idayu has the right to express a wish.

She has waited for this moment. She knows, as everyone knows in Tuban, that the *Adipati* will include her in his harem as a concubine. Idayu scrapes all her courage together, and says with utmost effort, “Forgive me, my lord, I don't want to offend you, but ...” Her voice breaks. She trembles all over her body. Then she recovers. “It is my wish to marry with Galeng.” Certainly the *Adipati* will kill her now. That is his right, he holds the life of all his subjects in his hand. He will not swallow this offense.

In a flash Idayu remembers how she has travelled together with many people from her village Awiskrambil to the capital Tuban for the yearly dance and fight games. How their group has been welcomed enthusiastically at the boundary of the city by an excited crowd. How she has been declared the dance champion after an exhausting series of dances. How the rumours became ever stronger that the *Adipati* had an eye on her. How she has come to the conclusion that she would rather die than become a concubine of the *Adipati*.

The people cheer. Everyone understands what the wish of Idayu means: unconditional love to the death. How beautiful, what could be more romantic! People start waving and dancing, singing and shouting.

The *Adipati* rises, while the colour drains from his face. He puts his hand on the hilt of his kris. There is utter silence. Everyone gazes at Idayu and at the *Adipati*. Then the sovereign sits down again. He realises that he is lost, when he loses the respect of the people. “Today I will give the marriage my blessing,” he says with a twisted smile. The heralds repeat the words loudly to the people. A deafening cheering breaks out. Idayu dared to challenge the *Adipati* and Great Love has won! Who could have imagined a more beautiful conclusion to the festival?

#### Source

The book *Arus balik* (The current from the north, 1979) written by the Indonesian author Pramoedya Ananta Toer is a great history novel about the early sixteenth century. A few passages depict the village life.

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### **7. A small village in Japan – sixteenth century – film**

#### **Blinded**

“Don't do it, Genjurō, think of me, think of Genichi, our little son. Stay with us. What will become of us, when the enemy soldiers come? Who will protect us? Who will help us to escape? We don't need that money. Forget about it! It can wait.” But while Miyagi is begging, her husband Genjurō remains adamant. He must and will go to the town, where the official army has arrived. “Miyagi, this is our chance. Now, we will become rich. I can sell a lot. War is good for commerce.” Miyagi moans, her talk is not helping. In other circumstances, he is such a nice man, such a loving father, but now all he is thinking of is money.

Genjurō and Miyagi have a small farm in a mountain village. Like the other villagers, they grow rice. But Genjurō is also a potter. With the help of his wife he makes fine pottery. Since the official army established itself in the nearby town, he once sold quite a lot, because the soldiers and the officers needed all sort of things. Since then he is obsessed by the idea of becoming rich.

Meanwhile, from the other direction, enemy soldiers are on their way. The old village head urges everyone to prepare for war, to hide valuables well, and to bring as many goods and as much food as possible to the hidden encampment in the forest. Then the villagers can later flee to it, and hide there for a while. But as to Genjurō, it fell on deaf ears.

Genjurō is not the only one who has lost his senses. Also his neighbour, the penniless peasant Tōbei, has grand ambitions. He will enrol as a soldier, he will become a real *samurai*. He will show what he's made of. He will become famous, and rich by looting. His young wife Ohama is furious with him. "You cannot even handle a sword, you idiot. You are a peasant, so remain a peasant. You will regret this terribly."

A while later, Genjurō and Tōbei depart together to the town with a cart full of pottery. Ohama and Miyagi, holding Genichi in her arms, watch them go with worry in their eyes.

#### Source

The movie *Ugetsu* (1953) from the Japanese director Kenji Mizoguchi is about obsession, but also gives a penetrating image of village life in wartime.

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## **8. A Japanese village – 1586 – film**

### **The old samurai**

"Oh, how happy the farmers are, how they sing while planting out the rice paddy," Kambei Shimada muses, sitting on the burial mound of the village. Four of his comrades are buried there. They are just killed in action. "In fact we are the losers, and the peasants are the winners."

Kambei is an old *samurai*, a fighter. Some poor peasants had begged him to help them. They were desperate, because they had heard that a bandit gang would come to loot their village after the harvest.

Kambei didn't want to. He felt old. And, moreover, to protect a village is not all that simple. To protect is more difficult than to attack. You need at least six, seven *samurai*. How to find them quickly? Because peasants are poor, they cannot pay anything, other than a few bowls of rice per day. There is also not much honour to gain, because to fight for peasants is not particularly glorious.

But the peasants kept on urging him, and finally Kambei agreed. He even succeeded in finding six other *samurai* to assist the peasants. The fight against the bandits was not easy. The peasants were terrified, but the *samurai* gave them a tough training, and in the end there were four groups with long bamboo spears to protect the different sides of the village. The women also had big bamboo spears to fiercely attack the bandits, who nonetheless succeeded in entering the village.

Finally the bandits were defeated, thanks to the wisdom of Kambei, the bravery of the other *samurai*, and the immense fury of the peasants.

“Well,” Kambei smiles, “this time it was the other way around. We didn't attack peasants by order of a landlord because they didn't pay their taxes or to perform compulsory services, but we have protected them. Perhaps this was the most beautiful fight in my life as a *samurai*, even though we have suffered heavy losses.”

#### Source

The feature movie *Seven Samurai* (1954) from the Japanese director Akira Kurosawa is a splendid action film, which at the same time shows the misery and the anger of the medieval peasants.

\* \* \*

### **9. A forest in Rhineland-Palatinate, Germany – about 1630**

#### **Simplicissimus**

Dear reader, I am of most humble origins. But, as you can see, I still managed to learn to write. I will tell how this happened. As a child, I lived at a small farm in the middle of the forest. It was my task to herd the sheep. One day a lot of monsters showed up out of the forest. They were half bull, half man. The bulls had no horns, but the men had iron on their bodies. Later on I understood that they were soldiers on their horses, but I had never seen a horse before. The soldiers went to our farm, smashed everything to pieces, slaughtered a lot of animals, and killed my mother, father, sister and our servant. I was able to flee into the forest, and to hide in a hollow tree. Oh, what a terrible time it was.

When the soldiers finally moved on, I didn't know what to do. Nothing was left of our farm. I wandered through the forest, living on berries, nuts and mushrooms, when suddenly I heard a man singing. I watched him from behind a bush. How strange he looked: a long beard, his hair tangled, a garment made of all sorts of different pieces of cloth and leather. But finally I came out, because I was so awfully hungry.

The man proved to be a hermit. He had a tiny hut with only one iron cooking pot. He caught fish in a stream, gathered leaves in the forest to eat, and had a small vegetable garden with some beans and so on. A friendly pastor from a village many kilometres away brought him a bit of salt from time to time.

The hermit felt sorry for me. He was surprised at how little I knew, and that's why he called me *Simplicissimus*, what means *most simple*, as he explained to me. He told me stories from the Bible, and taught me prayers. When he noticed how eager I was to learn, he later on also taught me to read and write. When the hermit died peacefully a few years later, I moved on into the wide world.

#### Source

The novel *Simplicius Simplicissimus* (1668) from the German writer Hans von Grimmelshausen tells the life of an ordinary peasant boy who goes from one adventure to another.

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### **10. A village in Senegal – around 1700 – film**

#### **The courage of the Ceddo**

“I will not take another step, unfasten my hands immediately. You think you can tie me up like a slave? I am Dior Yacine, *princess* Dior Yacine.” Enraged, the dark young woman looks at the Ceddo warrior. He unties the rope from around the wrists of the woman, and shouts at her, “It is all because of your father, king Demba War. You have no idea how much suffering he brings upon the land. Don't think we will continue to accept that.”

A little later Dior Yacine lies down in a hammock in the shadow. She has given her royal word of honour not to run away. In the meantime, she has calmed down a bit. She does understand the Ceddo. The situation seems hopeless. The white priest recruits villagers for Christianity, and the imam for Islam. A white merchant openly trades in slaves. Her father, the king himself, is considering converting to Islam, because he has to 'move with the times.' The villagers are confused. The only ones who are determined to maintain their traditions and their independence are the Ceddo, the warriors. In fact, she respects the Ceddo stance.

Suddenly Dior Yacine is startled by some men shouting that the princess should be set free. The Ceddo call back that first the king has to break off with the imam. Then, a shot rings out, and a second one. But the Ceddo evade the bullets skilfully, kill the two shooters flawlessly with their arrows, and then threw themselves into a trench they have dug specially for that purpose.

With dignity, Dior Yacine gets up from her hammock. More bloodshed is not necessary. Of her own free will, she will walk to the village, and there she will in public call her father, the king, a coward, a spineless man – that he might better follow the example of the Ceddo.

#### Source

*Ceddo* (1977) from the Senegalese director Ousmane Sembène is a powerful movie about decline and resistance.

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## **11. Haiti – around 1785 (1)**

### **The poison**

A mysterious poison is spreading across the plain. It began at the farm of Monsieur Lenormand de Mézy. All of a sudden, two beautiful French dairy cows fell on the ground; for a few moments they jerked their legs wildly, and then they were dead. Ti Noel, a young slave who knows a lot about animals, explained to his master that cows from distant countries sometimes eat dangerous herbs by mistake. Then other farms were affected as well. Not only cows, but also bulls, goats and horses died suddenly.

Black, bald-headed vultures are now perched everywhere in the trees, ready to peck open the carcasses. Everywhere, dark clouds of smoke rise from the big fires in which the dead animals are burned. The stench of death hovers over the whole plain. But it does not stop there. The vicious poison now also enters the houses; one farm owner after another gets cramps and dies.

In the night, Ti Noel slips in deepest secrecy to the cave where his good friend Macandal lives. He is a huge black man, a Mandinka from Guinea, a slave who had lived on the same farm as Ti Noel, but who

ran away. He has collected poisonous mushrooms, dried and ground them. He blends the powder with a bit of water, and then distributes small bottles of the deadly mixture to his confidants at several nearby farms. “Strike the whites, kill what you can kill,” he whispers to them, “and wait until the time comes. I will lead you.”

The farm bosses become more and more desperate. Furiously they strike their slaves with their whips, and torture them over fire. Until at last, one of them confesses, “It is the runaway slave, the Mandinka, Macandal. He is the Master of the Poison, the Bringer of Death.” Now, all whites, from soldiers to bankers, search the forests with packs of dogs. But to the great relief of the slaves at the farms, they don't find Macandal. Not even after weeks of searching.

The slaves become more and more cheerful. In the evening around the campfires, they tell each other stories about the Mandinka. That he has escaped the dogs and soldiers, because he can transform himself into any animal. “Didn't you see that pelican? What is it doing here so far from the sea?” one says. “There was a beautiful green lizard on the flat roof,” says another. “Of course, that's Macandal! He visits us, he stays among us,” answers a third. Whispering, Ti Noel adds, “Until the time comes. Until the time comes....”

### Source

*The kingdom of this world* (1949) from the Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier is a vibrant novel about slave life in Haiti.

Part 2: Land surveyors - Haiti – around 1835 (2), story 14.

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## **12. A village in Berry, in the centre of France – around 1790**

### **Roast chestnuts**

“Let us make a fire, that's the best we can do” Marie says firmly. Germain doesn't like the idea. “How do you think you can start a fire in this wet forest? Everything is soaked through.” “Have you then never been a shepherd boy?” Marie asks, surprised. “Do you see that group of oaks, underneath it is dry. I can tell you, under those oak leaves you will find dry branches. Just get your tinderbox.”

Within a few minutes a good fire burns, and Germain and Marie can dry themselves, warm up and take some rest. “You are a clever girl, Marie, I have to say. No, I was never a shepherd boy. As soon as I could walk, I had to take care of the cows, and later on of the bullocks on our farm. Then you don't learn all of this.”

Marie is a sixteen-year-old shepherdess. She found work in another village. She dreaded the thought of leaving her mother, a poor widow without other family. But she had no choice, she had to earn some money. She feared even more to go there alone, because to get there you have to walk through a forest, and then, you never know who you will meet. Fortunately, she heard that Germain, a young, unmarried farmer in the neighbourhood, was going to the same village to visit a relative. So, they walked together. At the end of the afternoon a heavy fog rolled in, and they got lost in the middle of the forest. At some point it became pitch-dark, and they couldn't continue on.



Fortunately I have some bread with me,” Germain says, while they sit by the fire, “we will share it.” “Then, I will treat us to chestnuts,” Marie answers, and with a small stick she brings out a few from under the glowing embers. Germain looks with big questioning eyes. “Yes, I collected them, while we were walking through the forest, and put them in the embers right away, once the fire was burning. That's how we shepherds do it.”

Germain tells Marie to go to sleep, he will care for the fire, and keep watch against the wild animals. Marie wraps herself in her cloak, but she cannot fall asleep. “Germain is really nice,” she thinks, “he is sturdy, too, and good-looking. It's a pity that I am from such a poor family. He will never be able to marry me.” Then her eyelids become heavy, and she dozes off.

#### Source

The *Devil's Pool* (1846) is a charmingly written short novel of the French author George Sand about the peasant life in her own village.

\* \* \*

### **13. A village in Berry, in the centre of France – around 1792**

#### **Little Fadette chuckles**

“I should have left earlier,” Landry, a sturdy young farmer, realises. He breaks out in a cold sweat. The water of the small river is deeper than he had thought. It is already dark. He is not sure where to cross. He did try it already, but was soon waist-deep in the cold water. Across the river he notices some light from the little house of Grandma Fadet. “I have to head for it,” he tells himself.

But suddenly, the light is behind him, and then to the left. The little light is dancing up and down, as if to make fun of him. “I have to leave here, away from that will-o'-the wisp. I just step into the water; here should be the ford.” A few moments later Landry is standing up to his neck in the water, and the current threatens to pull him along with it. In a panic he turns around, and for a moment he goes under the water, but is able to reach the bank. Exhausted, he falls down on the grass. But there is the will-o'-the wisp again ...

Then, Landry hears a girl's voice. That will be Little Fadette, the girl who lives with Grandma Fadet. She has just crossed the small river, and almost bumps into him. “It is only me,” he says timidly, “I don't mean you any harm.” “How nicely you talk, all of a sudden,” the girl answers, “I know why, it is because you are scared to death, I hear it in your tone of voice. Probably because of that will-o'-the wisp. Come with me, hero, I will bring you across to the other side.”

Actually Landry wants to turn down the help of Fadette, but the thought of spending the whole night alone with that will-o'-the wisp terrifies him too much. Soon he crosses the small river with her. She knows exactly where to step, and pulls his hand with her. Soon, they are on the other side.

The family of Landry is rich, and that of Fadette poor. They have been at odds with each other for decades. But now, Fadette has helped Landry out. He is ashamed that he always been so arrogant to her.

– “Fadette, I'd like to thank you. You can ask me for whatever you want, and if it is possible, I will give it to you.”

– “I don't need gifts from you, you don't even notice me.”

- “Fadette, please, please ...”
- “Okay, I don't need a gift, but let us agree that tomorrow at the village festival, you will dance seven times with me, and not with any other girl.”
- “Agreed!” Landry answers, relieved.

Next day the whole village talks about Landry. “Look at him, he danced constantly with that poor girl, from a bad family at that. He left alone his girlfriend Madelon, with whom he is almost engaged.” Quietly, Little Fadette chuckles about it.

#### Source

The French woman writer George Sand wrote the lovely novel *Little Fadette. A Domestic Story* (1849) about love and discord in a small village.

\* \* \*

## **14. Haiti – around 1835 (2)**

### **Land surveyors**

“Get out of here, this is my land, I am living here.” Infuriated, Ti Noel shakes his fist at the land surveyors. When he has gone on raging for some time, one of them takes him by the ear, and gives him a hard blow with his measuring rod. Hastily Ti Noel stumbles back to his hut, and peers from there at the trespassers.

Ti Noel is an old black man with a bony face, and silvery-grey curls. Day after day, he wears the same long green silk coat with pink cuffs. All day long, he talks to the ants, the birds, the goats and the wasps. And sometimes also to the people who pass by and wave to him.

Ti Noel has experienced a lot in his long life. First he was slave at a farm; he herded the cows there and took care of the horses. Secretly he was a friend of the legendary black leader Macandal. He took part in the great rebellion against the whites. After independence he returned to his old farm, which was now ruined and abandoned. There he built a small hut. Later on, he was one of the leaders of the uprising against the black dictator, king Henri Christophe. During the looting of the palace, he took away a royal coat, which he still wears every day.

Finally, the land ended up in the hands of the the coloured persons. They declared that all former farms of the French belong to the state. And that black residents are obliged to work for the republic. Once again, Ti Noel sees supervisors appearing with whips. Once again, he sees the sweat on the foreheads of dark men and women. Once again, he hears the clanking of chains. Does it never end?

Then, Ti Noel remembers Macandal. He could transform himself into an animal. While he is thinking about that, he sees a green bird perched on a twig. The next moment, he himself is the bird. He is perched on the twig, and looks downwards. He hears the land surveyors in the distance, flies to them, and poops on the head of one of them. The following day he is a little goat, an ant or a goose. Until one day the sky becomes black-green, and a hurricane rages across the land. Since then, no one has seen Ti Noel again.

### Source

*The kingdom of this world* (1949) from the Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier is a vibrant novel about slave life in Haiti.

Part 1: The poison - Haiti – around 1785 (1), story 11.

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## **15. A valley in Ireland – 1846**

### **The angel and the sailing ship**

Mary stays near the low wall of her kitchen garden. She has just dug up the last two tubers. She looks into Black Valley, and counts the smoke plumes that come from the huts. “Just twenty-seven,” she tells herself, “ten huts are already abandoned. People are leaving. How beautiful this valley always has been, with its green potato fields. But now death prevails.”

It is autumn. Just before the harvest all the potatoes suddenly started rotting from a terrible disease. The peasants are desperate, because potatoes are their most important food. How can they pay their rent, when they have to buy food in the shop all the time?

Ireland is a colony of England. The land is held by English owners. The rent is high. The stewards are merciless. When you cannot pay your rent, the bailiff comes to take your livestock. When you don't have livestock any more, you will be evicted from your land.

Already three times Mary has dreamed of an angel, who points to a big ship with billowing sails. Third time is a charm. This is not just a dream, this is the hand of God! Together with her husband and baby she has to emigrate to America, the land of abundance, with its rustling golden wheat fields. While Mary is singing her baby to sleep, her mind wanders off to the free land far away, without heartless landowners.

### Source

The book *Famine* (1937) written by the Irish author Liam O'Flaherty describes the terrible potato disease in the middle of the nineteenth century, which caused countless Irish people to decide to emigrate.

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## **16. A remote mountain village in Japan – in the 19th century – film**

### **'Narayama is waiting for us'**

“My dear grandmother, don't leave us,” the peasant says, “don't abandon us.” His stepmother agrees with him. “Kesakichi is right, mother, take your time, there's no hurry.” Grandmother Orin – a petite, healthy, silver-haired woman – smiles. “Children, I have turned seventy years old now, you know that. Slowly it is becoming time for me to climb the mountain, to seek out our god Narayama. My mother did it, my mother-in-law too, and now it is my turn. Narayama is waiting for us, he is happy to see us. This winter I will go away. Don't worry about it, that's the way it's been as long as anyone can

remember.”

Yes, that's the way of things since time immemorial. But each time it is a tragedy. For Kesakichi – a serious peasant in his mid-twenties, with long black hair brushed back and twisted into a bun at his neck – it will be terrible to miss his beloved granny. But there's no other choice. Life is hard here in the mountains, the harvests are meagre, and this year there are two more mouths to feed: his stepmother Tamayan who has taken the place of his mother who died years ago, and his own wife Matsuyan. Besides that, his wife is pregnant, and here it is considered shameful to see your great-grandchild. The older people have to make way for the younger ones. That's the law of this region, that's your sacred obligation.

“Do you know what's the most beautiful thing?” grandma Orin continues. “Sometimes it suddenly starts snowing, and everything turns white. That's how our beloved god Narayama welcomes us. Then, everywhere it becomes shining white.”

### Source

The movie *The ballad of Narayama* (1983) from the Japanese director Shohei Imamura beautifully frames both the harsh peasant life and the natural setting.

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## **17. South African villages – nineteenth century**

### **Praise poets**

Each people in South Africa has its own 'praise songs', in which village poets sing the praises of their own heroes. The legendary conqueror king Shaka (ca. 1787-1828), who forged the insignificant Zulu group into a widely feared and well respected people, is sung of in terms like leopard, lion and elephant, the one who is as great as the mountains that surround Zulu land, the man who lives in great wrath, the ardent fire that scorches the tall grasses, and the great, ruthless persecutor.

Nevertheless, the praise singer does not shy away from calling his hero a cruel man, who will fall prey to the revenge which he has provoked himself.

The master-strategist Sotho king Moshoeshoe (ca. 1786-1870) is celebrated in songs as the great connector, the peacemaker who averts wars, and the cave of refuge for the poor and the kings.

The praise poet tells how the villagers came in droves to his funeral and washed his body with their tears. He continues: “You will bury his bones, but the king lives! The house of Moshoeshoe lives, the king isn't dead, he is sleeping.”

Occasionally nature is the subject of a praise song, like the Fundudzi lake, which the praise poet describes as the incredible wealth of the Venda nation, where you can catch fish with a grass basket, brimfull, and where the birds fly swiftly over the sparkling water.

The Fundudzi lake is inhabited by white crocodiles and a mythical giant snake, which brings prosperity. The lake is given the finest sorghum beer as an offering, and underwater drums make fairy-like tones. “The lake is my mother”, confesses the praise poet, “and I am her creation.”

## Source

In the beautiful book *With words as with candles* (2002), the South African author Antjie Krog gives an overview of the finest poems of the different peoples of her country.

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## **18. Queensland, North Australia – about 1860**

### **Black or white?**

Jock McIvor, a robust farmer with a stubbly beard and dark brown hair mixed already with some grey, sits with his elbows on the table, both his fists against his cheeks. He stares ahead with unseeing eyes. It is always difficult for him to get going, but today more than usual. He didn't sleep well, and that's understandable. Yesterday morning, when they were walking to the pasture to milk the cows, his eldest son who was walking ahead of them suddenly ran back to him, "Daddy, dad, come look, come look." He couldn't say any more, he shook like a straw. Jock quickly followed after him, till he saw the three geese. Beautiful white animals, but now with big red spots under their heads. Someone had slashed their throats.

About ten years ago Jock and his wife Ellen migrated from Scotland to the north of Australia. After a few tough years they finally obtained a piece of land allotted by the government, and they started their own farm. It is hard work, and the climate is difficult: blazing hot summers and, time and again, forest fires. Slowly but surely it's becoming something. They live in a remote corner of the country, but they have neighbours with whom they get along very well. Or rather, *got* along very well.

About a year ago a small, dark man with straw-yellow hair came walking out of the bush. The children of Jock and Ellen, who by chance were playing there, took him to the farm. The man turned out to be named Gemmy, and spoke hesitantly a few words of English.

Gemmy was around thirty years old. As a thirteen-year-old child he was put overboard from the ship where he was galley boy. He was gravely ill, and that's why they put him on a raft. Days later he washed ashore on the beach of Australia, where Aboriginals found him. They gave him water and something to eat. Gemmy lived sixteen years with them, and became one of them. Until he heard about white phantoms who had settled on the land. He wanted to see them.

Jock and Ellen took Gemmy in with their family. After all he was an Englishman, and he was in a bad way. But the neighbours didn't like him – for them, he was a black. It could well be that he was a spy, and that he would tell everything to his black friends, who perhaps came to visit him in the night. And that these would one day suddenly attack them, and kill them with their spears.

"Complete nonsense," Jock said, "and for that matter, he is not a black, but an Englishman and a poor wretch who needs help." But the neighbours were not open to reason. You could never trust a black ... And so, the atmosphere deteriorated. The children were harassed at school, Gemmy was punched, and Ellen got 'well-intentioned' warnings from the neighbour women.

When Jock goes out after breakfast, he mutters to himself, "I won't let them intimidate me, Gemmy will stay with us, and who dares to touch him will have to deal with me." But he can't get the image of

the geese out of his mind, lying on the path, their heads askew, and with a strange red collar.

#### Source

*Remembering Babylon* (1993) is an intriguing novel from the Australian writer David Malouf about misunderstanding and mistrust.

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### **19. A village in Liberia – around 1860 (1)**

#### **'He is not your enemy'**

A group of boys of about twelve years old walk to the hut of their friend Halay, who is eating together with his parents. His father says, “Hey boys, do you know what Halay just said? That he will chew up all of you, and that he will throw three of you to the ground at the same time.” Halay looks at his father anxiously. He wants to cry, I have never said it. But his father looks sternly at him, and Halay swallows his words. “Well, let him come with us, and we will see who will be knocked down,” says the toughest of the group. A few others snicker. The father nods to Halay, and almost imperceptibly blinks his eyes at him. Halay understands the silent signal, and tries to stand up as bravely as possible.

For the last few months, Halay’s father has taken him every time along with him into the forest to teach him how to fight. Wrestling, throwing and receiving punches, yelling to scare the enemy, his father has taught him everything. Now the time has come to put it into practice.

Together the boys walk to a dusty place, in the middle of the village. There is a group of girls, and when they realise that there will be a fight, they immediately start singing 'fight songs'. Soon the fight has begun. Halay hits the dirt several times. He could almost cry. One boy is much stronger than he, and another is more limber and quick. When he quickly rubs his face, to keep from crying, the girls laugh at him. Sita, the most beautiful girl of the group, shouts, “Do I see a little tear, my hero?”

Then, Halay remembers how his father has taught him how to yell, and he rushes at the next boy with a lion's roar. The boy is startled by it, and Halay makes use of the moment to grab him by his waist, to swing him up and throw him on the ground. Then, he sits down across him and thrashes him on his shoulders. When the boy begs for mercy, Halay, as heated as he is, pushes his face to the ground and rubs sand in it.

“Let that boy go,” the girls shout, “you don't treat a friend like that. He is not your enemy.” When Halay has calmed down, he gets up and beats the dust from his arms and legs, and stealthily looks at Sita. She brusquely turns away her head. The boys laugh.

#### Source

The novel *Land of My Fathers* (1999) from the Liberian-Dutch author Vamba Sherif tells the history of Liberia, the country that was founded by black Americans, former slaves. It describes the tensions between the colonists and the indigenous tribes.

Part 2: There is war in the air - a village in Liberia – around 1890 (2), story 30.

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## 20. Prairie in Colorado, United States – 1863 (1)

### Bison hunting

Elated, Wind In His Hair stands looking at the immense animal lying on the ground. He has done it again! He has killed a big bison bull. Although he was almost killed himself by the bison. When he was chasing the running animal on his pony at full gallop, it suddenly turned his head with the two enormous horns in the direction of the charging pony. It was too late to slow down, but by reflex the pony jumped aside, and got away with a big gouge on his chest. Swiftly, Wind In His Hair turned around, and shot his rifle in the direction of the bison. It was a bad shot, it hit the animal in its right front leg. It stumbled, though, and broke its neck.

Wind In His Hair is a Comanche Indian, about thirty years old, with a quite dark, long, narrow face. He is an energetic warrior, and he also is at the front of the line at the bison hunt. The last weeks have not been easy. There was little to eat. The bison didn't appear. Scouts went daily in all directions, but they returned empty-handed. At last, the wise old men decided on a ceremony. Led by the medicine man Kicking Bird, the whole group gathered around a big campfire for the bison dance. They spent the whole night dancing, and just when everyone was exhausted and about to go to sleep, a scout arrived on his pony with the good news that a herd of bison had been spotted. Everyone shouted with joy, and immediately got ready to leave to follow the herd. The whole community, men and women, young and old, went along.

When Wind In His Hair has admired 'his' bison bull long enough; he kneels down by the dead animal, plunges his knife into its breast, and draws it downward. The intestines slide out. The first women are just arriving, and begin to strip the animal of its splendid pelt. Everyone is in high spirits. Tonight there will be a feast, with an abundance of the most delicious grilled meat.

#### Source

The book *Dances with wolves* (1988) from the American writer Michael Blake tells about an American sergeant who comes into contact with Indians. It keenly portrays Indian life.

Part 2: The holy forest desecrated - Prairie in Colorado, United States – 1863 (2), story 21.

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## 21. Prairie in Colorado, United States – 1863 (2)

### The holy forest desecrated

Just before dawn, Kicking Bird leaves the tent encampment on his brown spotted pony. He has a long ride ahead of him, but the true reason for leaving so early is that he longs to be alone. Alone with his thoughts. A few days ago, he had had such a terrible dream about a barren plain full of bleached bones in the sun. They were the bones of his friends, his family, his people. A chilly, bleak wind blew across the plain. Death was reigning.

Kicking Bird is a Comanche Indian of about fifty years old, with a broad, round face. He is serious by nature, it is evident in his glance. He is the medicine man of the community. It's his role to always keep his mind attuned toward the Great Spirit. For the past few days, Kicking Bird has been troubled, almost confused. That's why he is going today to the Holy Forest of the Comanche.

When Kicking Bird has ridden a few hours over the endless prairie, he indeed has calmed down. With the birds, the clouds in the blue sky, a fox that darts away, and the fragrance of the grassland, his mood brightens considerably. Perhaps he has worried too much.

At last, Kicking Bird arrives at the Holy Forest. He vividly remembers coming here for the first time with his father, when he was still a child. How his father has told him that the Great Spirit had brought here life on earth. How he then has sensed himself the power of the Great Spirit, as young as he was.

When Kicking Bird rides into the forest, he again is impressed by all those different majestic trees. He breathes deeply in and out, and feels how a serenity takes possession of him. But not for long. The forest is quiet, too quiet. The atmosphere is oppressive. He smells something, it is not fresh. The place reeks of death. Then he arrives at a large, sunlit meadow in the forest. There, to his shock, he sees a pile of dead deer, from which the heads are crudely chopped off, and the legs also. Squirrels and skunks lie on the ground, shot dead. Trees lie scattered on the grass, cut down without removing the branches. Why? Then he sees two makeshift huts. All sort of rubbish lies nearby, including a lot of empty whisky bottles. Kicking Bird understands. Hunters have been here, whites. They don't know how to deal with the gifts of the Great Spirit. He has seen that before.

Disheartened, Kicking Bird rides back to the encampment at a trot. He urgently needs to speak with Ten Bears, the old chief.

### Source

The book *Dances with wolves* (1988) from the American writer Michael Blake tells about an American sergeant who comes into contact with Indians. It keenly portrays Indian life.

Part 1: Bison hunting - Prairie in Colorado, United States – 1863 (1), story 20.

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## **22. A village in Victoria, Australia – 1866 (1)**

### **Almost drowned**

“My dear child, you are not yet born, I don't even know if you are a boy or a girl; but still I am writing down for you everything that has happened in my life.” Ned Kelly, a robust country man with a full head of wild hair, combs his fingers through his reddish-brown beard. Then he picks up his pencil again, and goes on writing. “People say I am a bandit, and that's true. But it was never my choice. It was my fate. I never wanted more than a piece of land to grow grain, with pasture for a few cows and horses, and a hearth to sit in front of in the evening. But it wasn't meant to be.”

“I would like to tell you about my life. Well, once, when I was about eleven years old, I was walking to school early in the morning. At the stream I saw a little boy, Dick Shelton. It was spring, and the stream



had grown into a small, but wild river. Suddenly Dick's new straw hat was blown into the water. He took a stick, and tried to fish his hat out of the swirling water. When that attempt failed, he stepped into the river. I shouted, "Come back, come back!" but it was too late. The water pulled him away.

Before I knew what I was doing, I jumped into the river, swam with a few strokes to Dick, and grabbed a hold of him. Together we were carried away by the current. At a bend in the stream, we floated next to a fallen gum tree. With one hand I held Dick, and with the other one I tried to pull myself up on the tree. That wasn't easy, because it was as slippery as ice, but finally I succeeded.

Fortunately Dick was still alive, although exhausted and unable to lift a finger. His parents had a hotel a bit further on. I hoisted the boy up on my back, and ran with my bare feet over the muddy path to the hotel. His mother screamed when she saw her son, and to me she cried, "Hurry on, go inside!"

"The hotel assistant sent me to the bathroom, and shortly after, brought me ten buckets of warm water. I had never seen before a bathtub and never experienced that you got so much water for washing. It was blissful. Dick's mother brought me some of his clothes. They were so soft and good-smelling. After the bath I got hot cocoa and was allowed to order whatever I liked. I chose lamb chops and fried kidneys. How I did eat! Dick's mother kept smiling at me. "What a great boy you are," she whispered, "you are the bravest boy in the whole world."

#### Source

In his thrilling book *True History of the Kelly Gang* (2000), the Australian writer Peter Carey brings the farm hand, peasant and folk hero Ned Kelly to life.

Part 2: Birth party - New South Wales, Australia – 1879 (2), story 25.

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### **23. A fishing village on the coast of Sicily, Italy – 1867**

#### **'What a miserable damn life!'**

"My poor boy," Grandpa tries softly, "what are you complaining about? You are healthy, you are a real fisherman, a professional, who can make a living. You can be proud of it. Each time we can save a little money, so that you can marry after a while ..." But Ntoni doesn't want to listen. He has served in the military, and has seen how rich people live in the city. That's what he wants, too: having fine clothes, strolling through the shop-lined streets or park, chatting a bit, dining out.

"I feel like a galley slave," Ntoni bursts out, "sitting at the oar from Monday till Sunday, from early morning till late at night. And now we've also lost our house. And who will I marry then? Some other poor wretch?"

Ntoni is right: they have had to sell their modest but charming house with a courtyard, and move into a small, shabby rental house. "Every family has its setbacks from time to time," Grandpa answers quietly, "but don't worry, we will recover." "Call this 'setbacks'?" Ntoni retorts. "Mother died of cholera, Father drowned at sea, and our savings have gone into fixing up the boat. That's our fate: poverty, working like a dog, and then being dinner for the sharks. Ugh, what a miserable damn life!"

Ntoni turns around abruptly, and walks with long strides in the direction of the pub. Grandpa watches

him go, shaking his head.

#### Source

In the book *The House by the Medlar-Tree* (1881) the Italian author Giovanni Verga describes life in a small fishing village: the gossip and the jealousy, but also the solidarity and mutual support, especially in times of need.

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### **24. A remote hamlet in Wyoming, United States – around 1870 – film**

#### **Little Joey**

“Bang, bang, lay down stupid dog, you're dead, bang, bang.” The 'stupid dog' jumps up happily. Little Joey wants to play with him, that's always fun. Wildly Joey runs around, with his wooden gun in his hand. “Joey, Joey, come inside, it's time for bed,” he hears his mother calling. When he enters the living room, he sees tears on his mother's face. “What's wrong, Mommy?” She doesn't answer him, but says quietly to his father, “Don't do it, Joe, it makes no sense. If you love me, if you love little Joey, then don't do it!”

Joey is an eight-year-old boy with straight-cut blond hair, in shabby and patched clothes. He is excited for a very good reason. Today, he went with his parents to the funeral of one of the settlers here, who was shot dead in a saloon.

For the last few years there has been a conflict between a rich, old rancher with a large herd of cattle that grazes on the prairie, and some younger settlers, who bought a piece of the prairie land from the government and started mixed farming. The rancher is in trouble, because the price for cattle is decreasing, and less and less land is available for his big herd. He wants to have the land of the new settlers, but they are not at all interested in selling their recently purchased land. They want to build up their own, independent lives.

Gradually the tensions heat up, and finally the rancher has hired a hitman, to scare away the settlers. After the murder of one of them, Joe Starrett, the father of little Joey, is so angry that he is determined to shoot both the rich farmer and the hitman.

“Mommy, where is the murderer now? You know, when I grow up, I will kill him. Really, I can do that.” His mother, still with tears on her face, smiles. “You just get some sleep, son, and tomorrow you can play some more.”

#### Source

*Shane* (1953) from the American director George Stevens is an outstanding Western film.

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### **25. New South Wales, Australia – 1879 (2)**

#### **Birth party**

“My sweetest girl, how happy I am! Yesterday morning your aunt Kate came running with a telegram from America that you are born, safe and sound. I cried out loud for sheer joy, I got on my horse, and emptied both my revolvers into the air. My mates were surprised, but when Kate called to them that I just had become a father, they started galloping around me, singing and shouting.

A girl from a little pub got on her pony to spread the good news all around. It was cold weather and the poor farmers really could not leave their pigs and cows alone, but still they came to party with us. As night fell, they started six big bonfires, and we all sang Irish songs together. Even when the alcohol was finished, they didn't want to leave. That's just how people are around here, my darling, dirt poor, but through and through good and warm-hearted.”

“Since I am writing you, I want to tell you something. The newspapers write that I am a dangerous criminal, a murderer. But that's not true. I have killed a few police officers, but only because they were out to kill me. Only in extreme cases have I killed, when I really couldn't avoid it.

Because of false testimony by a police officer, who had it in for me, I had to run away from your grandma's farm. With your uncle Dan and a few friends, I started a secret farm in the bush. But there, also, the police didn't leave us alone. Finally we had no other choice but to rob a bank to get money. But I swear nobody got a single scratch during the robbery. With that money we helped several poor families, and since then the poor people help us to hide from the cops.”

“With the bank money your mother has paid her passage to America. She was pregnant with you, and she was terrified that something would happen to you. I myself could not leave, because your grandma has been jailed, even though she has done nothing wrong. Just to catch me. I cannot leave her alone, she is my mother. I have to stay close to her. But as soon she is released, I will come to America together with her. Then we will finally meet at last.”

### Source

In his thrilling book *True History of the Kelly Gang* (2000), the Australian writer Peter Carey brings the farm hand, peasant and folk hero Ned Kelly to life.

Part 1: Almost drowned - a village in Victoria, Australia – 1866 (1), story 22.

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## **26. A river in Iceland – 1879**

### **The crossing**

The old man undresses the toddler quickly. His face is weathered but his gestures are vigorous, as if he is still in the prime of his life. “I am bishop Thjodrek, I am an emissary of the Most High,” he calls to a group of horsemen on the riverside. “I baptise this child now to let it go straight to the Eternal Kingdom of God, when it dies.” Then he dips the toddler briefly into the cold water, and murmurs prayers while rubbing the howling child dry with a cloth, and putting it under his sweater to warm it with his body.

Thjodrek sits in a big sloop in the middle of the river. He orders the boatman to let the sloop drift with the stream. When the boatman objects, he repeats in a loud voice that he is a bishop, and sent by God himself.

Thjodrek, together with a group of converts, is on his way to a port town to travel from there with a steamer to the Mormon community in America. He grew up in a small farm in Iceland. Later on he went roaming, and ended up in the Mormon community in Utah, United States. Thereupon, he returned to his country of birth to preach the Mormon faith, and take followers with him to the holy community across the ocean.

One of the impoverished people in the sloop is Steina, a young woman, the mother of the toddler. She huddles on one of the benches, in a haze of tears. She looks fearfully toward the horsemen. These are the powerful and brazen Björn Mud and his cronies. Mud had gotten her pregnant, but never wanted to acknowledge the child. He has brought so much shame on her and her family. But, when he heard that she was leaving for America, he had quickly rounded up some friends to take seize 'his' child from her. She knows for sure that Thjodrek would rather drown the just-baptised child than let it fall into the hands of that devil.

Mud sees the sloop drifting with the stream. A few of his mates want to pursue it. But he knows that there are swamps and quicksands. You can't do anything there with horses. Mud raises his right hand and shouts, "Come on, we'll go, there is no need to witness a child murder." Further on the sloop runs against the river bank, and the converts continue their journey.

#### Source

The Icelandic author Halldór Laxness recounts in his novel *Paradise Reclaimed* (1960) how a group of poor peasants starts a new life in faraway America.

\* \* \*

### **27. A small village in Massachusetts, United States – 1884**

#### **Silver lining**

His heart pounds in his throat when he realises which girl is whirling through the hall. Ethan Frome, a tall, slender farmer, about thirty years old, with bright piercing eyes, has just arrived here, walking in the dark through the high snow, and now looks from the outside through the window of the church hall. Tonight there is a dance party. A young man has just invited a girl with a red head scarf, and together they dance through the hall. The male dancer is Denis Eady, the handsome, slightly arrogant son of the well-to-do shopkeeper of the village. The other one proves to be Mattie Silver, the girl that Ethan has come to pick up. Faster and faster, the pair dances. Mattie lays her head lightly on Denis' shoulder, and Ethan observes from the flush on her cheek that she is completely absorbed by the dance.

It is now a few months ago that Mattie, an eighteen-year-old girl, came to live at Ethan's farm. She is a cousin of his wife Zeena, and her parents have died. She had no place else to go. Zeena decided that she could come to the farm, to help with the housework, in exchange for room and board. Every now and then, she goes to a church party. That's her only amusement. At the end of the evening Ethan comes to take her home.

Ethan has been unlucky with his wife Zeena. They have been married for seven years, but after the first year she fell into ill health. One day she is suffering from this ailment, and another from something else. She is completely consumed by her illnesses, and becomes ever more rigid and morose. At the

moment when Ethan picked up Mattie at the railway station, a spark caught. He will never talk about it, but Mattie is the silver lining in his cold life.

A few minutes later, the dance is over. The musicians pack their instruments, and the young people leave the hall one by one. Ethan stays a bit back, in the dark. Mattie is the last to leave. She looks around, apparently looking for him. Then, Denis pulls up on his horse sleigh. Laughingly, he calls out, "Mattie, get on the sleigh, I will bring you home. You're not going to walk all alone in the dark, are you?" He moves up a bit, and taps with his hand on the free space next to him on the bench. Mattie answers cheerfully, "I'd rather go walking, the air is so clear. You don't think that I am afraid of the dark?"

When the sleigh glides away jingling, Ethan takes a deep breath. A great feeling of happiness streams through him. Mattie turned down Denis! Quickly he steps out of the shadow toward Mattie, and a moment later they walk together through the snow in the direction of the farm. Once, when Mattie almost slips, Ethan puts his arm through hers. Very lightly, she pushes herself against him.

#### Source

*Ethan Frome* (1911) is a sensitive novel of the American writer Edith Wharton about the life of a poor farmer's family.

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### **28. A village in South-east Nigeria – around 1885**

#### **'We will drive out the whites now!'**

It is night. Okonkwo is already lying on his bamboo bed when he hears the iron gong of the village herald. Tomorrow morning, everyone has to go to the *ilo*, the big meeting place in the middle of the village. Okonkwo can not sleep any more out of excitement. Finally, Umuofia, his village, will take action. It is high time! The whites have to be driven out.

Just a few years ago, the first white man appeared in Umuofia. A priest came with a translator telling them that their gods were false. He proclaimed his own god as the only genuine and much more. Most people had to laugh about the strange things he said. However, the priest still acquired some followers. Mostly people who had been cast out of the village and lived in the Evil Forest.

After some time, the priest asked the village elders for permission to build a house of worship for his god. They wanted to turn him away but were afraid. They had heard the story of Abama, a village nearby. When a white man arrived there, the oracle told the villagers that the whites would destroy their gods and village life and devour everything, like grasshoppers. Out of fear, they killed him. A few weeks later, some whites, together with a group of native soldiers, came to the village on market day. They killed everyone they saw.

This prompted the village elders to give the priest permission to build a house of prayer for his foreign god. They hoped that would not be harmful. The weaklings from Umuofia who wanted to join in the new religion, could do as they please. In the village, they are useless.

Afterwards, the village life was going on as usual. The men toiled in the cassava fields, the women grew corn and beans. Village festivals went on, girls were married off, the oracle was consulted when someone was very ill, and there was a village meeting when problems arose.

However, the whites brought not only a new religion, but with it an administration. In a town nearby, they established a court of justice with white judges who didn't understand anything from the village customs. They also established a prison which became full of men who broke the laws of the whites. In the meantime, many villagers started working for the whites as boys or *kotmas*, court servants, and prison wardens.

Okonkwo sighs deeply, when he thinks about all of it. But fortunately today the gong summons everyone to come to a big village meeting. We will drive out the whites now, before it is too late!

#### Source

In *Things Fall Apart* (1958), the Nigerian author Chinua Achebe first describes the village life carefully and lovingly. Then, he tells how the first white men arrived and seized control of the country step by step.

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### **29. A village in the north of Mexico – around 1890 – film**

#### **Bandits and assassins**

“How long must this go on? How often does this have to happen again?” Hilario desperately shouts to the villagers. Once again the notorious gang of robbers of Calvera has looted the village. They have snatched away chickens, hides, dried meat, wine; everything that they saw. Laughingly they said “*Adios*, see you again.” Undoubtedly they will return after the corn harvest.

“We have to fight against them,” Hilario continues. “Well, what can we do against a gang of forty robbers?” someone else laments, “they have guns, we only have our machetes.” Finally the village decides to seek help in the town. Not from the *rurales*, the gendarmes, because they really will not come to protect their village. They will try to find some experienced gunmen. Hilario and two other peasants collect all the gold and silver that is in the village, and start on their way. It isn't much, but it's worth a try.

Luckily, they find a capable bounty hunter, who takes pity on the poor peasants, and rounds up some mates. After all the dirty jobs of the last years, now they want to show their good side.

Ten horsemen – three peasants in white cotton clothes with sombreros and seven tough gunmen – travel a few days through the wild area with cactuses taller than a man and small streams to the village where the corn is already drying in sheaves on the field. Hilario is in high spirits. These professional fighters will attack the bandits together with all the villagers and drive them away. It will not be easy, but it has to succeed.

#### Source

The movie *The magnificent seven* (1960) made by the American director John Sturges is a classic

Western, with beautiful landscapes, galloping horses, and tough gunfighters. The movie depicts at the same time the live of the Mexican peasants.

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### **30. A village in Liberia – around 1890 (2)**

#### **There is war in the air**

“Let that man go,” Halay shouts, sparks coming from his eyes. Halay is a handsome man of about forty years old, with his first grey hair. He is a grandson of the founder of the village, and is therefore always treated with respect. About five militia members, in uniform and with a gun, lead a man with them, his hands tied behind his back. When they don't respond to Halay's furious cry, he adds, “What's his crime?”

The oldest one of the militia answers calmly, “He didn't pay his taxes. According to the president in Monrovia (the capital of Liberia), everyone has to pay taxes.” “I don't know a president,” responds Haley. “I only know the village head. I can trust him. He helps me, and I help him. But that so-called president of yours has never helped me with anything.” Then the militia boss has had enough, and says to one of his men, “Arrest him, too. Resistance to the government is forbidden.” At once about ten villagers come and start yelling at the militia. With that, the militia boss decides not to arrest Halay after all.

When the militia has passed through with their prisoner, Halay says to one of his friends who has come to his rescue, “It makes me sick to pay taxes every time and to do unpaid work for that so-called new government in Monrovia. And every time these annoying remarks about our village beliefs and that we are backward and that we should send our children to school. We have to stop it.” “How could we do that, Halay?” answers his friend, “they are determined to 'modernise' the country, as they call it, and they have real guns.”

In the evening the militia boss comes to the hut of Halay, alone. “Can I come in?” he asks politely, as he steps over the threshold, and sits down on the ground. “Listen to me, Halay, don't be so angry. You surely must know that this area belongs to the republic of Liberia. This is the modern era, whether you like it or not. Just accept it, don't challenge us. In the end that will cause war, and you know how it will end.” Halay holds his tongue and looks to the ground. “Indeed,” he thinks, “that will lead to war.”

#### Source

The novel *Land of My Fathers* (1999) from the Liberian-Dutch author Vamba Sherif tells the history of Liberia, the country that was founded by black Americans, former slaves. It describes the tensions between the colonists and the indigenous tribes.

Part 1: 'He is not your enemy' - a village in Liberia – around 1860 (1), story 19.

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### **31. A village in Gujarat, India – 1893 – *film***

## Cricket, a children's game?

“Believe me, *Mai*, mama, we have no choice. Who in our village can pay double taxes? Perhaps a few rich families, but no one else. There was no other way but to accept the challenge, no matter how terrible it is.” Then, Yashodama’s eyes become moist, “When you speak like that, Bhuwan, it is just as if I hear your father again. He also had courage and truth in his heart. Don't worry, with the help of Lord Krishna everything will turn out fine. In you I have total confidence. What are you going to do to win the game?”

Yashodama is an older peasant woman, with a friendly, tranquil face. In her lustrous black hair the first grey can be seen. Because she is a widow, she wears a white sari. Bhuwan is her beloved son, nineteen years old, as strong as a lion, and usually in a good mood. But sometimes, when he is challenged, he gets that fierce look in his eyes. Then, he can be reckless. Like last time.

One afternoon it was blazing hot. There was not much to do on the land, because the rains had not come. Some young men of the village Champaner had walked over to the English army camp. Sitting down in the shade, they watched the English playing cricket. When the ball rolled in their direction, Bhuwan was just explaining to a friend that it looked like *gilla-danda*, “that game we used to play, when we were kids.” The British captain who came to retrieve the ball, and who spoke a bit of Hindi, caught those words and was deeply offended. “Do you think you can beat us?” he asked Bhuwan angrily. “Of course,” he answered bluntly, “it is no more than a children's game.”

The relationship between the inhabitants of the peasant village and the English occupiers is tense. The taxes that they have to pay are intolerably high. Last year only a little rain fell, and they could only pay half of the *lagaan*, the tax, with the condition that they would pay double *lagaan* this year. But this year not a single drop of rain fell. When the village elders of Champaner come to the fort to beg the captain again for a tax deferral, he is as hard as stone. “Last year we agreed on paying double *lagaan* this year, and I am standing by that. That it didn't rain is not my fault. I have expenses for the fort, and all the soldiers, what do you think? ...”

Then, the captain sees Bhuwan standing back a bit. “Come here, you! You found cricket to be a stupid children's game, wasn't it? I will forgive the double *lagaan* for Champaner this year entirely, on the condition that you will win a cricket match against us. If you lose, you will pay triple *lagaan*.” The village elders start lamenting, but the captain demands that Bhuwan makes the decision. He hesitates, but then accepts the challenge on behalf of the village. With the help of Lord Krishna, Champaner will win the match, and will not pay taxes this year.

### Source

*Lagaan* (2001) is a splendid, double-length feature film by the Indian film maker Ashutosh Gowariker.

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## 32. A remote farm in the marshlands of Iceland – 1899 (1)

### The reindeer

Crouching down, Bjartur creeps up to the rock, without making the slightest sound. Carefully he peeks



over the rock. Four reindeer are standing right in front of him, three cows and one sturdy bull. The animals don't see him, because there is a blizzard raging, and they stand with their heads downwind. Bjartur has made his plan. In a moment he will jump on the bull, grab him by his antlers, and throw him on the ground. Then, he will make a hole in his nasal cartilage with his pocket knife, and put a cord through it. In that way, he has a rein and can take the animal to a farm nearby to slaughter it there.

Bjartur of Summerhouses is a small-scale sheep farmer. A few months ago he bought a piece of land on credit, and built himself a sod-covered hut on it. After being a sheep hand for eighteen years, he started his own farm together with his wife Rósa, a small flock of sheep and a work horse. After the hay harvest he together with a few small sheep farmers searched for the sheep which were wandering across the endless marshes, to drive them back into the farms. Because in the merciless cold winters the animals have to be in the stables.

Bjartur was missing a ewe, Goldilocks, a splendid young animal. He decided to search for her. Alone he wandered across the marshlands up to the blue mountains. He knows every little spot, because he grew up on the east side of this area, and worked as a sheep hand on the west side. He knows where the sheltered spots are, where the sheep hide sometimes. Bjartur likes it to roam this area all alone, to centre himself.

Suddenly he saw four big animals on a sandbank near the glacier river. When he cautiously came closer, he saw that they were reindeer. That was a godsend for him. Reindeer meat is the most tasty meat there is, and the rich will pay well for it. Even if he couldn't find Goldilocks today, he hasn't made his journey for nothing.

Bjartur crouches behind the rock for the last time. His heart is beating in his throat; that is the hunting instinct. Slowly he emerges from behind the rock, and steps silently beside the bull, then leaps toward his head, and pulls him down by his antler. The three cows run away immediately, and the bull looks up indignantly, and wants to lift his head. Bjartur hangs with his full weight on the antler, but doesn't succeed in throwing the bull onto the ground. The animal moves his head furiously back and forth, and pulls Bjartur along in the direction of the river. Bjartur knows that the river is ice-cold, but he doesn't even consider leaving the reindeer. The only thing he can think about is leaping on the back of the animal. There, he clings to the antlers with all his strength, and presses his legs to the animal's body. The bull tries to shake off Bjartur, and when he doesn't succeed he walks to the river, as if he intends to start swimming. Bjartur fears the worst.

### Source

*Independent People* (1934) by the Icelandic writer Halldór Laxness is a monumental novel about the small sheep farmers in his country: powerful and moving.

Part 2: Independent after thirty years - a remote farm in the marshlands of Iceland – 1911 (2), story 54.

Part 3: Rich for a few years - a remote farm in the marshlands of Iceland – 1922 (3), story 72.

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## **33. A fishing village, the Netherlands – 1900**

### **Fear**

“Yes Ma, I am afraid. May I? May I!” Barend is shouting. “Ashore I am not scared of anything, not

even the devil himself. When necessary, I will stab anyone with my knife. But I am terrified of the sea. My father was drowned, when I was just a young boy. I almost cannot remember him. My two brothers are drowned too. And I should not be afraid?! Do you know what Simon (the ship's carpenter) said about 'The Good Hope'? Do you really want to know? He said: 'That ship is rotten through and through. There is no point to patching it up. It is a floating coffin. The only reason for the owner to send it to sea is to get the insurance money.' And I should sign on to that ship? I won't do it. I simply won't do it."

Mother Kniertje has quietly started weeping during the outburst of her son. "As if I do not know that my husband and my two sons are drowned. As if I could ever forget it. But listen to me, my child. For three years I got some money from the widow relief fund, when the herring boat was lost on which your father and your two brothers were working. After that I had to scrape together a living for nine years."

Kniertje sighs and goes on, "Look at me, my dear boy. Don't you see that I already have grey hair. I am growing older. What will become of me? You are everything I have in my life. All my hope is placed on you. Please, sign on to 'The Good Hope', then we will have enough money for the time being. Don't be afraid. You are a seaman, a fisherman. What else can you do? You cannot even read and write properly. You didn't learn another trade. You did already sail for several years. You are experienced. You will get a nice salary. Please, do it for me. In six weeks we will see each other again."

A few weeks later 'The Good Hope' was lost in a violent storm. Barend was one of the twelve seamen who perished. The ship owner cashed in the insurance money.

#### Source

The play *The Good Hope* (1900), written by the Dutch author Herman Heijermans, pictures the hard fishermen's life.

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### **34. Flanders, Belgium – about 1900**

#### **Peasant Nand on his deathbed**

"Yes, Nand, my boy, there you lie, quite alone on your bed." The old peasant on his deathbed is awaiting the helper who will look after him, and looks around the room. Then he dozes off. In his half-sleep it is Sunday afternoon, and he walks around on his land to see how his crops are doing. True, he hasn't been a big farmer, he only had a small piece of land and just one cow. But he has enjoyed seeing the little piglets with the sow, the rape-seed with their vivid yellow flowers, the blushing apples in the orchard, the sun going down in an orange blaze.

When Nand wakes up, suddenly he has to smile remembering how he has once messed around with the daughter of the cobbler. He still recalls how she smelled of shoemaker's wax. He was still young at that time, not yet married. Later on he got acquainted with Wanne. He still smells the fresh scent of soap of her arms. Together they have had three children. He remembers how his dear little daughter Bertha smelled of cream, even when she was once very ill. He had been very concerned, but he shared his worries with Wanne.

Again Nand wakes up for a bit. The helper has not yet arrived. Again he sinks away in a state between sleeping and waking. In his mind he sees how he ploughs his field. He feels how smooth the handle of the plough has become over the years. And he feels how rough the coat of his dog is. Then he has to think about Wanne, how she has died. He feels in his right thumb and forefinger how he closed her eyes. When everyone went away after the funeral meal, he was lonely, so alone.

Without opening his eyes Nand feels how Wanne stays beside his bed. She undresses, and kneels down for the evening prayer. Nand prays with her: "Our Father who art in heaven." Then Wanne climbs into bed. From now on she will always be with him. Nand opens his mouth to say something, but sinks away in the depths.

#### Source

The short story *De boer die sterft* (The peasant who dies, 1918) written by the Belgian author Karel van de Woestijne describes in beautiful Flemish how a peasant looks back on his life.

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### **35. Anhui Province, China – around 1900 (1)**

#### **Famine**

Wang Lung really doesn't know what to do. There is nothing to eat at home any more. How will his old father, his wife, and his two children survive?

This spring it has not rained, not even a drop. The wheat harvest has withered; planting rice was impossible. The stock of last year is used up a long time ago. Nothing is left of the food he has bought in the town for the silver coins he had saved.

O-lan, his wife, slaughtered his beloved bullock. There was meat on the table at last. But it was impossible for him to eat even a bite of it. The bullock was like his mate. Together they had ploughed the fields year after year.

What are these men doing here? Men in grey coats, men from the town. "We come to help you. These are difficult times for you, aren't they? We will give you money. Do you want to sell us a bit of land?" Wang Lung groans. His land is everything for him, but now he has to sell to rescue his family. But when he hears the price the men want to pay him, he becomes furious and chases them away. They didn't want to pay more than one tenth of the normal price!

Later on O-lan addresses travelling buyers and sells them all their furniture. For much less than the real value. They will go south. They don't need furniture any longer, but silver coins all the more.

When they arrive in the small town nearby, a lot of people are hanging about. They talk nervously about 'fire vehicles'. Wang Lung has heard about them earlier but not yet seen them in reality. Now he and his family let themselves be dragged along with the crowd, and they succeed to getting in one of the railway coaches. Nearly all their money goes into buying train tickets. Only a handful of copper coins are left. They go south.

#### Source

The American writer Pearl Buck describes in *The Good Earth* (1931) the life of a peasant family with

only a small piece of land. Halfway through the novel, the family becomes rich by chance. In one novel, you get an image of the life of a poor peasant, a rich farmer, and even a large landowner.

Part 2: Poor people in the big city - Anhui Province, China – around 1900 (2), story 36.

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### **36. Anhui Province, China – around 1900 (2)**

#### **Poor people in the big city**

“The first thing you need to do is buy a few mats to make a hut” a fellow traveller in the train has advised. “And then, you look for a soup kitchen. For a penny, you will get a bowl of rice there.”

So Wang Lung buys a few mats from his copper coins, and his wife O-lan makes a hut from them. She builds it against the back side of a big wall. More huts are standing there. Thank God there is a soup kitchen nearby. Finally, they have something to eat again.

No copper coins are left now. “Go begging,” the man in the train has shouted. “That is better than working.” But Wang Lung fails to do that. With great difficulty, he learns to pull a rickshaw. Nevertheless, O-lan goes begging. She carries her baby on her arm. Hopefully, it will mollify the city people. Grandpa stays at the hut and looks after the toddler.

With great difficulty, they gather enough money to pay for the rent of the rickshaw, the bowls of rice, and a few urgent expenses. One night, when Wang Lung returns from his work, the hut smells of meat. When he takes his first bite, his son tells him with shining eyes that he has stolen the meat at the market. Furiously, Wang Lung smashes the meat on the floor and gives his son a few firm blows. “We are poor, but we are no thieves,” he shouts. But O-lan picks up the meat, washes it, and puts it back in the pot. “Meat is meat,” she says.

One day, Wang Lung is frightened. Soldiers in rough long coats go through the city and round up all the men they can get. The soldiers are going to war and need coolies. Wang Lung succeeds in escaping by hiding himself in the back of the hut under some straw.

He doesn't dare to work during the day any more. Now he pushes carts with boxes and baskets during the night. It is heavy work and brings in only half of the money he earned with the rickshaw.

Wang Lung longs for his village, his land, and the good warm earth which has fed them year after year. They have to find a way to save some money and return even if they have to walk. When it is not possible this year, then next year. Life in the city is terrible for the poor and the land is waiting for them ...

#### Source

The American writer Pearl Buck describes in *The Good Earth* (1931) the life of a peasant family with only a small piece of land. Halfway through the novel, the family becomes rich by chance. In one novel, you get an image of the life of a poor peasant, a rich farmer, and even a large landowner.

Part 1: Famine - Anhui Province, China – around 1900 (1), story 35.

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### 37. Siberia, Russia – 1902 – *film*

#### **The fur trapper**

“Well, they are good people,” Dersu Uzala thinks, sitting by the campfire, “but, they are not hunters, they don't know the forest, they are city folks.” Involuntarily, he has to smile. “They don't see a track until you point at it, they can't build a shelter quickly when a blizzard suddenly comes up, and also they can't cross a river with a raft when there is a strong current.”

Dersu, a short, stocky man, with an Asiatic appearance and a thin moustache, belongs to the Nanai, a Siberian people. He doesn't know exactly how old he is, but he is not so young any more. He has lost his wife and children during a smallpox epidemic. Since then he lives alone in the forest. He is hunting sables, selling their furs, and doing fine. But he was still glad to see traces of a small group of men with some horses. It turned out to be a military expedition to survey the territory. Fortunately, Dersu speaks a few words of Russian. The captain asked him to become their guide. It brought some comfort to his solitary life.

Dersu and the captain have become close friends during these months that they have travelled together. The captain comes and sits by the fire, next to Dersu. “Tomorrow our expedition is finished. We will arrive at the railway station, and travel back by train. Would you like to go with us? You are alone here, and you are growing a bit older. In the city, life is comfortable. You can stay with my family. My home is your home.”

Dersu looks at the captain inquiringly. He is touched by the friendly offer, but he still is reluctant. Now and then he visits a neighbouring town to sell his furs, but he doesn't like to be there. “What would I do in the city? I cannot hunt there, not even build a hut. I would rather remain here. Now and then I have to make offerings to the spirits of my wife and dear children. I belong in the forest.”

#### Source

The fine nature film *Dersu Uzala* (1975) from the Japanese director Akira Kurosawa shows what it takes to survive in the vast Siberian forests.

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### 38. A village in Friesland, the Netherlands – 1902

#### **Two hundred guilders in advance**

“Now I know what to do! When I sign, I will get immediately two hundred guilders, cash in hand. Then our worries are over.” Eelke is excited. Five minutes ago he was entirely down. The bailiff has laid a distress. In one and a half week's time their last piece of land will be auctioned off, together with the sod hut, the shed, and everything they possess. The last few years things were going terribly against them. All the peasants in the region have been knocked back financially. Each time his father had to sell some land. Now they will lose their last piece.

In an old newspaper he saw that you will get two hundred guilders in advance when you sign to go

to *the East*, to the Dutch Indies, for six years as a soldier. Immediately he understood that this is his chance to help his parents. And that is what he will do! How can his parents survive, when they don't have a piece of land? His father is too old to work as a farm labourer and his mother as a maid-servant for a rich farmer.

“Douwe, do you want to go with me to *the East*?”, Eelke shouts enthusiastically. “Not me”, answers Douwe bluntly. “Sell my body for six years? Not even for a thousand guilders. Imagine, you are away for six years. They can shoot you dead, or you can become ill.”

“Douwe, please go with me? We are comrades. Didn't we work together in the peat moors for years? I cannot leave my parents to their fate. Do they have to go begging in their old days? Or to receive poor relief? There is no work for us here.

Early next morning Eelke sets off for the barracks with his birth certificate and his copy of the civil registration. He hopes they will not reject him.

#### Source

The play *Ora et Labora* (1902), written by the Dutch author Herman Heijermans, pictures movingly the poverty of peasants.

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### **39. Norway – 1906**

#### **Piano tuner**

“Give me your Sunday clothes, I have an idea,” Lars Falkenberg says to his companion Knut Pedersen. Together they roam with their duffel bag from one hamlet to another, looking for work on any farm. Knut looks at Lars inquiringly. What does he want with his best clothes? “Yes, my friend, we need money. On the next farm I will ask to tune the piano. So I have to look well-groomed.” Knut was flabbergasted. “You can tune pianos?”

It is autumn now. Everywhere the harvest is already done. There is no work any more for itinerant farm labourers. Lars, indeed, managed to get a piano to tune on a big, luxurious farm. He has a tuning fork with him, and proves to have sharp hearing.

When Knut looks through a window, he understands Lars' approach. Before he starts tinkering around with a string, he observes quite well in which direction the screw stands, to put it back exactly, when it doesn't work well. In this way the piano at least will not become worse. The genteel farmer's wife is full of admiration.

Aimlessly Knut walks around the farm in his worn-out work clothes. His companion gets all the attention. It troubles him. But, Lars has not forgotten him. He arranges an invitation for him to the kitchen for a hearty meal. It is cosy there with the maids, and nice, warm too. At night they sleep up in the hay loft. “I have earned six kroner,” Lars says happily. “Tomorrow, I will ask the farmer's wife to write a reference. That can be useful in the future.”

#### Source

The book *Under the Autumn Star* (1906), written by the Norwegian author Knut Hamsun, concerns the mental struggle of the main character, but also pictures the life of itinerant farm labourers.

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#### **40. A village in Flanders, Belgium – 1907**

### **Weeding the flax field**

It is May, it is already becoming a bit warmer, dawn is coming earlier, and then the birds start singing like their lives depend on it. Schellebelle, a young stable-maid with ruddy curls and pale pink skin, works already several years at a big farm. She takes care of the cows. Actually her real name is Rina, but because she is always singing and joking, and laughs often and loudly, she is called *Schellebelle*, Jingling-bells. This year she will take part in the weeding of the flax field for the first time. From the other maids she has heard how pleasant that is.

Finally the day has arrived. A few days ago the farmer's wife passed by all the little tenant farms and huts in the neighbourhood, and asked for all the girls and women to come. Before daybreak, they go to the farm. First they get bread with coffee, and then they all walk together to the *vlaschaard*, the flax field. The girls are excited and cheerful, and as usual, Schellebelle can be heard laughing above everyone else. On their knees they crawl together in a straight line across the field, and pull out every blade and leaf that should not be there. Soon, an older woman starts singing. It is about a knight, whose eye had fallen on a simple peasant girl, but she didn't give in to him, "I am born to work." After this song, many others follow, about happy and lost loves, werewolves, the devil, accidents, funny events, and murders. Everything is treated in turn. Schellebelle listens eagerly, not to miss any word.

At midday the little bell of the farm rings, and everyone goes there to eat. Then, there is an hour and a half break to rest, or for the girls to chatter. After that there is coffee, and then everyone goes to the *vlaschaard* again. They are glorious days. Schellebelle enjoys them to the full. When the weeding is entirely over after a day or five, her head is spinning from all she has heard.

#### Source

The splendid novel *The Flax-field* (1907) from the Flemish writer Stijn Streuvels describes in detail the country life in Belgium of a century ago.

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#### **41. A small mountain village in Austria – around 1910 – film**

### **First farm-maid, then woman farmer**

"What a surprise," Emmy – a pretty, slender young woman with sleek brown hair – rejoices. Three farm-hands and two farm-girls had just arrived from a nearby farm to help with harvesting. Now, we will perhaps be able to make it, she thinks. Actually, it is almost too good to be true, the big farmers will do anything to get rid of us, but we don't let them defeat us. We will show them what we're worth.

It is now almost a year ago that farmer Hillinger was found dead. He had no children who would inherit the farm, and that meant that the church would get everything. But Hillinger hated the pastor worse than poison, and had written a last will wherein he bequeathed the farm to his seven farm-hands, both male and female.

The big farmers were infuriated when those damned bumpkins didn't want to sell Hillinger's farm to them, but wanted to play farmer themselves. Since when can a farm-hand or farm-maid be a farmer? How glad they were that the tax collector's office came up with an enormous supplementary tax: 12,000 shillings, due by mid-November.

That was a heavy setback for the farm-maids and hands. How in God's name could they round up these 12,000 shillings before mid-November? Among themselves they elected Emmy as manager, and she took her role very seriously. Everyone had to hand over all their savings. They decided to sell their five cows. Two of the stronger farm-hands started working in a factory nearby, and everyone contributed whatever he or she could to produce as large a harvest as possible this year.

How wonderful that, every now and then, a few labourers from other farms come to help us, Emmy thinks. They do it in secret, because their farmer mustn't find out. He would be furious. But still they come. While she is binding sheaves together with the newly arrived farm girls, Emmy says, "You coming to help us out makes this year the best one I have lived through on the farm."

#### Source

The movie *The inheritors* (1998) made by the Austrian director Stefan Ruzowitzky is a poignant drama about a unique experiment.

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## **42. A small Hutsul village in the Carpathians, Ukraine – around 1910 – film**

### **The icy cold water**

"Forgive me, Marichka. I'm married to Palagna, but I really couldn't help it. I was so alone. I missed you so much. And I still miss you, every day, and every night. When I look to our star, I know that you are near me. Why did you leave me? Why was I left alone?"

Ivan is a handsome young man in his early twenties, with a smooth, brown moustache. As a child, he had played with Marichka in the forest, when they had to keep watch over their families' sheep herds. He often thinks back to those days.

To earn money for their wedding, he left for a neighbouring village, where he again was a shepherd, but this time for money. Before Ivan departed, Marichka pointed out to him a brilliant star. From now on it would be *their* star. When Ivan looked at this star in the night, he knew that Marichka was also looking at it, and that they were together in spirit.

Marichka missed Ivan terribly, and one day she went to visit him. When she was close to the village where Ivan was shepherding, she heard a lamb bleating. She would rescue it, it would be her gift to Ivan. The lamb was perched on a mountain ledge, and just when Marichka finally had it in her arms, she slipped, fell into the river, and drowned.

Ivan was broken-hearted. With a bewildered look in his eyes, a wild mop of hair, and filthy clothes, he



wandered from one village to another. Until a few villagers persuaded him to take a good bath, pull on new clothes, and marry Palagna, an appealing young woman. The marriage quickly fell apart. Ivan couldn't forget Marichka.

One winter night, Ivan is so distraught that he walks to the river where Marichka had drowned. He bends down over the water. He has tears in his eyes. "Marichka, forgive me. You are the only one I love. I know that you are here in the water. I am so happy to see you back again. Come here to me, take me in your arms. I am yours, you are mine." Ivan stretches out his arms, and falls into the icy cold water. The following morning, the villagers find his rigid body.

#### Source

*In Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors* (1965), Soviet director Sergei Parajanov paints in vivid colours the peasant life in a mountain village. A marvellous movie!

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### **43. Chiapas, South Mexico – around 1910 (1)**

#### **Trapped to work in the jungle camp**

"Damn it!" Celso jumps up. Suddenly, he understands he will not be able to marry the girl of his dreams. Only five minutes ago he felt perfectly well, but now he is sadder than ever.

Don Gabriel has bought him out of the police cell. He should have stayed there at least for three months because he did not have enough money to pay the fine the judge had imposed on him the day before.

Three men had attacked him. One of them had sprung on him. When Celso was rolling with him on the ground, the two others called the police. The first man had a big cut from a fight at the pub. At the court, the cut was the 'proof' that Celso had tried to kill him with his knife.

Celso had recognized the men immediately. They were *coyotes*, recruiters, who by order of don Gabriel had to trap strong Indians to work on a *monteria*, a jungle camp to cut down mahogany trees.

The police cell was a terrible place for Celso. He was disgusted with the lice, the dirty food, the vomit of the drunkards, and especially the absence of fresh air. All his life he had been in the open air: in the village where he had grown up and at a coffee plantation where he has worked two years.

The rural life is not a joke. You have to work hard, and you don't earn much. That is true. But you are in the fresh air. You see the trees, you smell the plants, you hear the birds twitter. Sometimes you can catch an animal, to roast on the fire. In the night, the stars are there.

He was as happy as a child when don Gabriel bought him out. However, he had to sign a contract for the *monteria*. But anything is better than languishing in such a stinking cell.

But now Celso realizes that he can forget his marriage. Two years he has toiled to collect enough money for the bride price for his beloved girl. Now he has lost all his money. He will have to work hard for two years to repay his debt to don Gabriel and then another two years for the bride price. So long the father of the girl will not wait. He will marry her off to another guy.

One day he will catch these *coyotes* and kill them. He has nothing to lose any more

## Source

In *March to the Monteria* (1933) the German author Ben Traven pictures the life of Indians who almost like serfs have to work in the mahogany jungles. It is volume three of the series of six Jungle Novels or Caoba cycles. ('Caoba' is the Spanish word for 'mahogany'.) Since about 1924 Traven lived in Mexico. Undeniably his sympathy goes out to the Indian peasants, which he describes colourfully and lifelike.

Part 2: Aunty Modesta - Chiapas, South Mexico – around 1910 (2), story 44.

Part 3: The verdict of Modesta - Chiapas, South Mexico – around 1910 (3), story 45.

Part 4: Machine gun - Chiapas, South Mexico – around 1910 (4), story 46.

Part 5: Peaceful sunshine - Chiapas, South Mexico – around 1910 (5), story 47.

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## **44. Chiapas, South Mexico – around 1910 (2)**

### **Aunty Modesta**

Modesta, a young Indian woman, is sitting on a little hill by the roadside. She is waiting. At last, she sees a group of men arriving. About fifty Indians walk silently, gloomily, with big packs on their back. In front of them goes a white man on a horse. Behind and at each side ride three other horsemen. They are mestizos.

Suddenly two little children break away from the group and run to the woman: “Aunty Modesta, aunty Modesta,” they shout happily. Tears well up in the eyes of Modesta. She is so happy to see the children, but at the same time so sad when she thinks of what lies ahead for them. She hugs the children, picks up her pack, and walks to Candido, the father of the children. He looks completely dazed because he can't believe that his younger sister is standing in front of him. Only when the children pull at his hand and continue jumping and shouting that their aunty has come does he greet her. “Pedrito and Angelito,” he shouts to the children, “put the packs on your back and move on. The men on the horses will hit us with their whips!”

In the evening, sitting near a little fire at a makeshift camp, Modesta explains how it had gone. Yesterday, she finally had gotten permission from her mistress in the town to visit her family in the village. When she arrived there, neighbours told her that her brother had to go to a *monteria*, a jungle camp, to cut mahogany trees. When his wife was very ill, he had taken a loan for an operation. Before the operation could happen his wife died, but still he had to repay the loan by working a few years in the jungle. When she heard that, Modesta had immediately gathered a few things and gone with a pack on her back to the road where the jungle workers would pass by.

“My dear little sister,” Candido says softly, “off course I am happy to see you, and Pedrito and Angelito too, but a *monteria* is hell, it is not the right place for a young woman like you. Go back to your mistress in the town; in a few years we are free, and then we will meet again.” Modesta doesn't answer. When their parents had died while she was still very young, her elder brother Candido had cared for her like a father and a mother together. Now, she will take care of him and his two little angels. She is surely not the only woman who is coming along to the camp. She is firmly determined to assist her brother and the two children, as much as she can. Silently Modesta and Candido stare into the fire.

## Source

The book *The Rebellion of the Hanged* (part 5 of the so-called Jungle Novels, 1936) from the German writer Ben Traven portrays the difficult life of the Indian jungle labourers, their hardships, their solidarity and their resistance.

Part 1: Trapped to work in the jungle camp - Chiapas, South Mexico – around 1910 (1), story 43.

Part 3: The verdict of Modesta - Chiapas, South Mexico – around 1910 (3), story 45.

Part 4: Machine gun - Chiapas, South Mexico – around 1910 (4), story 46.

Part 5: Peaceful sunshine - Chiapas, South Mexico – around 1910 (5), story 47.

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## **45. Chiapas, South Mexico – around 1910 (3)**

### **The verdict of Modesta**

“Don't kill this man,” sounds the shrill voice of Modesta. The labourers from the *monteria*, the jungle camp, are surprised. Is this that shy girl who almost never speaks a word? Her eyes look so strange, as if they see nothing. “Don't kill this man,” shouts the Indian girl again.

“You, you,” with a piercing finger she points to Don Felix, one of the bosses of the *monteria*, who sits huddled up in a corner of the office. He has bent his arm over his head, and in this way warding off the first blow of the *muchachos*, the Indian labourers. Finally they are rebelling after years of cruel treatment and exploitation. They make short work of killing the bosses and guards.

“You, you brute! I can forgive you that you wanted to rape me and that I could barely escape. Because women are for you only a toy, that you can use and throw away.”

Suddenly all *muchachos* are quiet, while Modesta speaks as if in a trance. “I can forgive you that you have beaten up my brother time and time again, because he didn't work hard enough. Because Indian labourers are only tools for you, who you can use just as you please.” Here and there a *muchacho* whispers angrily: “Why forgive, let him die.” But the other labourers tell him to be quiet. Something historic is happening here. A young, modest Indian woman gives her devastating verdict on the system of the jungle camps.

“I can forgive you that you gave us only the most miserable food, because all expenses for us Indians are too much for you. That you tampered time and time again with our accounts, to keep us as long as possible in slavery, because Indians are no more than slaves for you.”

For a moment Modesta breathes heavily, turns her eyes upward, and seems almost to faint, but then she gets herself under control again, and goes on with her sharp voice. “But, I will never forgive you that you whipped Pedrito, my little nephew, my little angel, just eight years old, before the eyes of his father, till his back became red with blood, to punish his father because he wanted to run away. A child, innocence itself! For this, you will burn in hell forever. For this, the Indians will curse you from generation to generation.”

Modesta reels around and says hoarsely: “*Muchachos*, do your job.” With great difficulty she walks a few steps backwards, sits down at the floor and starts sobbing. The jungle workers kill Don Felix with a few hard blows.

## Source

The book *The Rebellion of the Hanged* (part 5 of the so-called Jungle Novels, 1936) from the German writer Ben Traven portrays the difficult life of the Indian jungle labourers, their hardships, their solidarity and their resistance.

Part 1: Trapped to work in the jungle camp - Chiapas, South Mexico – around 1910 (1), story 43.

Part 2: Aunty Modesta - Chiapas, South Mexico – around 1910 (2), story 44.

Part 4: Machine gun - Chiapas, South Mexico – around 1910 (4), story 46.

Part 5: Peaceful sunshine - Chiapas, South Mexico – around 1910 (5), story 47.

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#### **46. Chiapas, South Mexico – around 1910 (4)**

### **Machine gun**

“You like me a bit, don’t you?” Modesta asks with a little smile. Celso laughs loudly. “I am very sure I don't like you *a bit*.” “Well, then you should teach me to shoot with that machine gun.” “It's not that simple,” Celso answers, startled, “you have to know exactly what to do when it jams, and you have to learn to aim carefully, in order to actually hit these *cabróns* (bastards). But, okay, we will practice, we will start this afternoon.” “You are a darling,” Modesta says, flushing, and then, with tears in her eyes, “I want to destroy them all, who have killed my dear brother so cruelly.”

Modesta and Celso belong to a group of rebels, which formed spontaneously after an uprising in a *monteria*, a jungle camp for cutting mahogany trees. The Indian debt slaves who worked there were treated so brutishly for many years that at one point it was enough. They slaughtered all bosses and guards with their machetes. After that, they went to the inhabited areas to raid all the *fincas* (big farms) and distribute the land among the poor Indian farm labourers. Everywhere you could hear “Tierra y libertad”, land and freedom.

A reaction from the government was bound to come. The *rurales* (the ruthless rural police) were sent against the rebels. These defended themselves fiercely and many were killed on both sides. Candido, the brother of Modesta, was captured and brutally killed.

The rebels succeeded in obtaining a machine gun during the fight. Celso explains, “Look, Modesta, don't shoot around at random, that's wasting ammunition. First you aim, and then you shoot.” At the end of the afternoon Modesta shoots a mango out of a tree fifty steps away with only one shot. She is a well-motivated student.

#### Source

The novel *The General from the Jungle* (part 6 of the Jungle Novels, or the Caoba cycle, 1939) of the German writer Ben Traven tells the thrilling story of the revolt of Indian peasants in Mexico.

Part 1: Trapped to work in the jungle camp - Chiapas, South Mexico – around 1910 (1), story 43.

Part 2: Aunty Modesta - Chiapas, South Mexico – around 1910 (2), story 44.

Part 3: The verdict of Modesta - Chiapas, South Mexico – around 1910 (3), story 45.

Part 5: Peaceful sunshine - Chiapas, South Mexico – around 1910 (5), story 47.

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## 47. Chiapas, South Mexico – around 1910 (5)

### Peaceful sunshine

“Let us call our village *Solipaz*, Sun-and-peace,” Celso proposes. Indian rebel forces have to take some rest for a few months to regain their strength after several fights with the *rurales* (rural police). Many Indians got injured, and they have to recover in a quiet place. Indian fighters who are from this region, suggested to the 'general' – the Indian who has a few years' experience in the national army, and leads the rebel army – this remote and inaccessible area. At the north side there is a mountain ridge with only a few steep and narrow trails, which a handful of fighters can block, and at the south side a perilous swamp, where you have to know the paths precisely so as to not get lost or drown. Between the ridge and the swamp lies a lovely area with a forest, a stream, a prairie and a piece of land which the Indians can convert into some fields. Within six weeks they can harvest the first maize from it.

The general has decided not to carry out any big attack for the time being. Only small groups of *muchachos* (Indian young men) raid *fincas* (big farms) to loot what they need. The government has to get the impression that the rebel army is eliminated, and that only some gangs of bandits are wandering around, like everywhere in Mexico in these tumultuous times.

“After three, four years, when the revolution is over, and the dictator has been driven out, we will register our village with the new administration under the name 'Solipaz', and then finally we will have land and freedom, *tierra y libertad*”, Celso continues. “But, we are not there yet. First we have to finish off quite a lot of these *cabróns* (bastards), before they slaughter us. And that we will do, but for the next few months, we will just sit in the peaceful sunshine.”

#### Source

The novel *The General from the Jungle* (part 6 of the Jungle Novels, or the Caoba cycle, 1939) of the German writer Ben Traven tells the thrilling story of the revolt of Indian peasants in Mexico.

Part 1: Trapped to work in the jungle camp - Chiapas, South Mexico – around 1910 (1), story 43.

Part 2: Aunty Modesta - Chiapas, South Mexico – around 1910 (2), story 44.

Part 3: The verdict of Modesta - Chiapas, South Mexico – around 1910 (3), story 45.

Part 4: Machine gun - Chiapas, South Mexico – around 1910 (4), story 46.

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## 48. A village in Flanders, Belgium – around 1910

### Houtekiet

Jan Houtekiet is the founder of our village Deps. He died a few years ago, but many tales are told about him. That's how we Depsers honour his memory. I could spent hours talking about him, but let me tell you the best story: how Houtekiet ended up with Depserland for next to nothing.

To begin at the beginning: in former times this used to be a barren heath with a lot of marshes, and here and there some little trees. Houtekiet, who was a real lover of life, liked to wander around here when he

was a young man. He always knew how to catch a hare or some fish. Whenever possible, he slept in the open, and otherwise he would cobble together a small shelter of leaves. Until he started a relationship with Lien, a peasant girl. One thing led to another, and when she had to give birth, he built a nice mud hut for her. Later on, more farm labourers and maids came to the Depser heath, who were tired of the overbearing farmers, to construct something in freedom.

Fertile clay proved to be at five spits deep, and little by little, modest but flourishing little farms developed, and the village of Deps was born. For centuries the land had been owned by the castle. The earl had never done anything with it, because it was known as worthless land. You couldn't even collect firewood there decently.

The earl had not yet dared to collect rent, because the wildest stories were circulating about Houtekiet and the other heath peasants. But once the land really began producing something, all Depsers understood that sooner or later the earl would come to extract rent. They urged Houtekiet to do 'something'. So, one day he went to the estate manager and told him that he needed a paper, documenting that the castle sold the Depser heath for the price of worthless land. "Yes, but all right, but", and this and that, the estate manager began. But, Houtekiet, not being a man of many words, had not come to discuss, and pounded his fist on the table: he needed that paper, and soon! The estate manager began shaking, and took Houtekiet to the earl. There Houtekiet also pounded his fist on the table a few times, when the laborious discussion was taking too long. And also the earl thought that he might better surrender, because after all, you only live once and he didn't want run the risk of having an 'accident' with his horse, or his castle going up in flames.

And that's how we Depsers ended up with our land, thanks to Houtekiet, our founder, our hero.

#### Source

The novel *Houtekiet* (1939, no English translation) from the Flemish writer Gerard Walschap is a vital story with valuable details about peasant life.

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### **49. Bahia, North-east Brazil – 1910**

#### **'Now it is my turn'**

"Now it is my turn; now it is my turn," keeps running through the head of Tonio. The cease-fire was in effect until full moon, but now it is the full moon. Any moment, the murderer could come to shoot him. Two months ago, his older brother was killed by the oldest son of the family who owns the neighbouring land. A month later, Tonio killed the murderer. He hadn't wanted to do it, but his father had shouted to him: "Think of our family's honour! Do you want your brother and your uncles to have died for nothing?"

"How long are these killings going to continue?" Tonio asks himself. A long time ago, the other family seized a big piece of their land. They took it back. Then, the other family grabbed the land again. At that time, it must have begun.

The oldest brother of his father killed the oldest son of the other family. In retaliation, the second-to-last son came to kill Tonio's uncle, the murderer. And so one after the other, from one generation to the

next, eye for an eye.

Now it is my turn, but I am only just twenty years old. What do I know of life? Hard work at our sugar cane farm in the burning sun. And every time, the threat of murder and revenge, of mourning and burial.

How will this end? Soon I will be shot dead. And my younger brother? He is still too young. In a few years, when he is old enough, he will avenge me. And then? This makes no sense. This has to stop. I should run away now, while it is still possible. My father would find it terrible when I would flee. Then, the family's honour would be lost. As he said bitterly a few days ago: "Look around you: there is almost nothing left. Only our family's honour We have to save it. Keep this in mind!" But this is meaningless.

#### Source

In the movie *Behind the Sun* (2001), the Brazilian film-maker Walter Salles tells the story of blood-feud. At the same time you get a beautiful image of the life on a sugar cane farm in a remote area.

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### **50. South-east Nigeria – around 1910 (1)**

#### **'Do you think that money grows on trees in my garden?'**

"No, no, no, I won't go to Efuru." Nwabata turns away, rolls over with a jerk on the conjugal bed, putting her face to the wall. "Please, my wife, be reasonable," Nwosu tries carefully, "what else can we do? You know that we need money for the new season. We have to hire people to prepare the land, and we have to buy small yams to plant. Otherwise there will be no harvest, nothing."

Furiously Nwabata turns back to her husband and shouts at him, "You were the one who wanted to party with your friends when we sold our yams, instead of paying back our loan to Efuru. You think we should give our second daughter also to Efuru as collateral? No way, I am not even going to consider it! I'd rather die first."

The next evening Nwabata tells her husband that she wants to visit Efuru. They go together. Efuru is happy to see them. Her helper, Ogea, the daughter of Nwabata and Nwosu, is excited to see her parents. "Oh, that's nice of you," Efuru grumbles good-heartedly, "I haven't seen you for ages. Hey, that little one on your back, is that Idika? What a sweetheart, how old is he? Already four months? Now you see how long you haven't visited me."

When there is a silence, Nwabata seizes the opportunity. "Efuru, could you please help us again? We need money for the planting season. We are broke." "You need money?" Efuru responds angrily. "After the last harvest you didn't bring me any yam. You even didn't come to tell me you couldn't repay a part of the loan. I paid everything for you, Nwosu, when you were ill. But you didn't visit me once, when you were better. Do you think that money grows on trees in my garden?"

Defeated, Nwabata and Nwosu look at the ground. Efuru is right, but a life in poverty isn't so simple. Then, to their surprise Efuru asks, "How much do you need?" "Anything you want is good," Nwosu says softly. "Will ten pounds be enough? Ogea, bring me the little case from the sleeping room." When Ogea has left the room, Efuru says in a low voice, "I'm doing it because I am so fond of Ogea."

A little later Nwabata and Nwosu walk home, in good spirits, but silently. That night they sleep peacefully, for the first time in a long while.

#### Source

The book *Efuru* (1966) written by the Nigerian author Flora Nwapa is about the sadness of a woman who cannot bear children. But at the same time it gives an impression of the peasant life.

Part 2: The disobedient girl - South-east Nigeria – around 1910 (2), story 51.

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### **51. South-east Nigeria – around 1910 (2)**

#### **The disobedient girl**

“Ogea,” Efuru calls, “look for Eneke, and ask him to come and tell a story.” It is already night, but there is a beautiful bright moon in the sky. All the children are playing outside. Soon Eneke arrives. The children greet him excitedly.

“Settle down, then I will tell you the story of the disobedient girl, who had to marry a spirit.” Then Eneke begins. “Once upon a time I was in the land of Idu-na-oba. There I saw a wealthy woman with a beautiful daughter. Oh my, how beautiful she was. One day her mother had to go to the market. She had urged her daughter to stay inside, and had assigned all sorts of chores to her, in order to avoid her going out.”

“When the mother had just left, her friends came walking by. ‘Come play outside,’ they called, ‘we will help you with your chores.’ In no time all the chores were done, and the girls walked into the forest to the udara tree with its delicious fruits. While everyone was looking for fruits, a splendid ripe udara fell on the ground just in front of the girl. ‘Thank you!’ she called to the tree. ‘Ho ho ho,’ called the spirit, who was sitting in the tree, ‘now you are my wife.’ The girls were frightened, and rushed back to the hut and locked the door, to prevent the spirit from entering. When the mother came home, she saw the spirit standing outside, and she at once understood that her daughter had disobeyed her. Oh, oh, what should she do?”

“But the girl was clever. She begged the spirit to let her say goodbye to her elder sisters. The spirit agreed. One of her sisters had a great plan. When the spirit was lying in bed with his new wife, and was deep asleep, she very quietly took everything out of the hut, and woke her sister. She bound banana leaves by the feet of the spirit, to let him think that his new wife was still sleeping with him. Together they slipped out of the hut. The sister climbed onto the roof of the hut with a can of kerosene, and poured it out on the roof. A few moments later the hut was engulfed in flames, and the spirit was dead.”

“He got what he deserved,” shout some children, “he should have left that girl alone.” “Please, Eneke,” says another, “tell us another story.” But Eneke stands up. “No, no, children, that’s long enough for one day, I will have some drinks with the men of my age group.”

#### Source

The book *Efuru* (1966) written by the Nigerian author Flora Nwapa is about the sadness of a woman



who cannot bear children. But at the same time it gives an impression of the peasant life.

Part 1: 'Do you think that money grows on trees in my garden?' - South-east Nigeria – around 1910 (1), story 50.

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## 52. An estate in Hungary – 1910 (1)

### As free as a bird

“We were as free as a bird,” Gyula Illyés remembers. He has been an adult already for a long time, but he often recalls with fondness the estate where his father and his mother were servants, and where he was raised. He thinks of the gently descending green slopes with the forests at the top, and the endless corn and flax fields below. At the bottom of the valley was a small stream.

Gyula spent time with a group of boys who were a bit older than he. “How happily we roamed through the forests. Sometimes we went to the stream, though my mother had warned me that it was quite deep at some places.” A few bigger boys carried him on their shoulders to a small island, where they built huts.

Another time they climbed on top of the granary, or they buried each other in a sea of shaved-off wool. There was always something exciting to do.

One morning a girl came to get Gyula. She took his hand, and carried him along with her. She brought him to a big hollow behind the pig shed. They crawled into it, and were hidden from view by thorny acacia shrubs on the edge of the hollow. He had to take off his clothes, and she did the same. They examined each other thoroughly, and wrestled a bit. “I must have been only eight years old. She was in such a bad mood, because she didn't know exactly what to do, and I didn't either,” Gyula smiles. “That's how we came to know life.”

#### Source

The book *People of the Puszta* (1936) from the Hungarian author Gyula Illyés is a blend of an autobiography and an anthropological study, with numerous small stories about what Illyés saw and experienced himself in his youth.

Part 2: Serf or free servant? - an estate in Hungary – 1912 (2), story 56.

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## 53. An estate in Northern Italy – 1910 (1) – *film*

### Olmo is growing up

Leo, the old farmhand, slaps his open hand on the table. “Who says 'bastard'?,” he shouts, and his eyes shoot fire. Nobody answers, there is a deathly silence. “In this house there are no bastards. The father is one of us. Isn't he, Rosina?” Rosina, the mother of Olmo, goes on sobbing quietly. Then, Leo continues, a bit more kindly now, “Well, Rosina, you must know it.” “Of course I know,” she answers, and then

her eyes light up, “even if I don't know it.” Everyone has to laugh. “Bring Olmo,” Leo says.

In the big, somewhat run-down living room of the servant part of a large estate, about thirty farmworkers, men and women, are eating together. They are all members of the Dalco family. They talk, they make jokes, but also sharp-toned remarks – for example about Olmo, a boy about nine years old, a *diablo*, a rascal. Once again, they threw at Rosina, his mother, that her son is a *bastardo*, a bastard. Sobbing, she ran away.

This is the last straw for Leo. He is a farmworker about seventy years of age. He has a moustache and stubbly beard, he wears a weather-beaten hat even at the dinner table, and he has a raspy voice. He sits at the head of the table, and is the undisputed leader of the family.

Olmo is eating in the stable with a plate on his lap, together with the other children, when he hears his name called. He is afraid of being in trouble for one of his pranks. He wants to run away, but a pair of strong hands grasps him, and puts him on the table. Quickly he takes off his hat, presses it under his right arm, as it should be, and walks step by step in the direction of Leo. “Listen, Olmo, you are growing up. Soon you will start learning to read and write. Later on you will join the military, and you will see the world. But just remember: you will not become an official, *carabiniere* or priest. I will not have those kinds of people in this house. You are a Dalco, you will become a *paesano*, a peasant.” Olmo nods his head. Leo offers him his glass, so that he can drink a sip of his wine.

#### Source

The masterful, five-hour-long movie *1900* (1976), from the Italian director Bernardo Bertolucci tells the story of the big changes in the lives of peasants in the first half of the twentieth century; the great agricultural strike of 1908, mechanisation, fascism, resistance and liberation.

Part 2: The cavalry unit turns around - a village in Northern Italy – 1920 (2), story 69.

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#### **54. A remote farm in the marshlands of Iceland – 1911 (2)**

### **Independent after thirty years**

“Yes, my dear Jón, this is my last payment. Thirty years I have worked for you, but from now on I am no longer indebted to you.” Bjartur of Summerhouses, a strong square-faced farmer with a bushy dark beard, looks Jón the Bailiff, the pale big landowner, right in the face. Jón shifts his chew of tobacco to the other cheek, and says softly “Poor wretch.” This arrogance is what Bjartur hates more than anything else. How often he has gotten annoyed about it. But today he will not let it spoil his pleasure. He is independent! He has never been happier.

For eighteen years Bjartur laboured for the family of the Rauðsmýri estate, the family of Jón the Bailiff, as a sheep hand – in winter feeding the animals in freezing cold, in spring helping ewes to litter, and in summer haying till late in the evening. He has never disliked it. He was crazy about sheep, and still he is. He knows everything about it, knows all the sheep by name, and he knows the peculiarities of every single animal.

In these eighteen years Bjartur has put aside öre after öre, to someday buy a small herd for himself,

and some building materials for a simple farm. Suddenly he got the chance to buy a piece of land from Rauðsmýri on credit. It was a big marshy land nobody wanted to buy, because the area was haunted. But Bjartur doesn't believe in ghosts, and he seized the opportunity with both hands. He himself built a small sod farmhouse, with a stable downstairs for his ewes, his rams, and his work horse. Upstairs under the sloped roof was the living-room. After that he married Rósa, a servant of the estate.

For twelve years Bjartur has repaid his debt every spring, when he had sold his suckling lambs to the merchant in the city. Twelve years of toiling with his wife, and later with their children. During hay harvest, sixteen-hour work days. Sometimes they worked the whole day in pouring rain.

Bjartur has lost a lot. His first wife died during the delivery of her first child. From his second wife, three young children died. Many sheep he has lost to animal diseases that plague the region. But Bjartur doesn't look back on what he has lost; instead he looks ahead to what he still has, and how he will go on with it. Because the annual repayments are over now, he can save money for a big ewe stable. At long last, the worst poverty is over.

### Source

*Independent People* (1934) by the Icelandic writer Halldór Laxness is a monumental novel about the small sheep farmers in his country: powerful and moving.

Part 1: The reindeer - a remote farm in the marshlands of Iceland – 1899 (1), story 32.

Part 3: Rich for a few years - a remote farm in the marshlands of Iceland – 1922 (3), story 72.

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## **55. A mountain village in Peru – 1912 (1)**

### **'Saint Isidore, don't desert us!'**

After a long day of gathering herbs for his sick wife, the old Indian Rosendo Maqui walks back to his village, Rumi. With a smile he sits down on his favourite rock, where he has such a fine view over the village and the valley in which it lies. How the golden wheat sways in the wind, how strongly the amaranth stands upright, how green the potato fields! The cows stay with their calves in one corral, and the horses with their foals in the other, because it is almost evening. Gradually the sun goes down, turning the sky orange and then purple.

In the middle of the village is a small but solid brick church with a short, square tower, wherein a bell hangs, the pride of the village, which can resound so beautifully through the valley. Near the back of the church stands a large wooden statue of Saint Isidore, the tiller, the peasant, the patron saint of Rumi. Perhaps it is because of him that the village flourishes, and that the harvests are abundant, Rosendo muses. Sure, once there had been a famine, when the rains didn't come for two years in a row, and a smallpox epidemic ravaged the village; but that is all a long time ago and almost forgotten.

Every year there is a colourful procession on the name day of Saint Isidore, at which villagers carry around his statue on a stretcher filled with vegetables and fruits. It is a day of dancing, music and *chicha*, maize beer. And the poor are not forgotten. Saint Isidore has nothing to complain about.

On his trips through the mountains, Rosendo has seen the ruins of abandoned villages. He knows about them, but every time it makes him sad to see them. In one village the plague has done its destructive

work; at another a *ranchero*, a big farmer, has taken over the fields and the meadows. The inhabitants had no choice but to become a farm hand at the big ranch, where they soon fell into debt, and thus became slaves.

Amazing that Rumi is still a free community, Rosendo thinks, and with both his index fingers he strokes his slight moustache. Saint Isidore, don't desert us!

### Source

The beautiful novel *Broad and Alien is the World* (1941) from the Peruvian author Ciro Alegría describes in 600 pages all the facets of Indian peasant life.

Part 2: Moving - a mountain village in Peru – 1926 (2), story 76.

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## **56. An estate in Hungary – 1912 (2)**

### **Serf or free servant?**

“But grandpa, you weren't happy to become free?” Gyula asks, astonished. He has just learned at school about the great Hungarian revolution of 1848, which abolished serfdom. “My dear boy,” grandpa answers, “the compulsory services, the tithes, the slave lobar on the estates which were owned by counts, that all has disappeared gradually. That is true. But, we are really not better off now. Don't believe that.”

Gyula likes nothing better than listening to grandpa telling stories about the past. He is sitting in the small backyard of his servant house at the Rácegres estate. There are quite a lot of beehives, because grandpa is a passionate bee-keeper Grandpa puffs his pipe, some bees are flying around, and then he goes on: “Well, what have servants these days, when they marry? All right, they are so-called 'free', but how many clothes do they have? Not many. When I married grandma, I had a box full of clothes, two pairs of boots, a fur cape, or whatever. Nowadays, a 'free' servant can be happy, when he has two sets of work clothes.”

Then, grandpa starts talking about the construction of the railroad, one anecdote after another. Gyula listens with open mouth. It is just as if he was there then. Suddenly, grandpa's face becomes gloomy: “Yes, sonny, it all started with the train. Before, we only grew the grain we needed ourselves. Because it was in fact impossible to bring it to Budapest by ox-cart But, when the train was there, the grain could be transported by wagon-loads. All of a sudden, the estates became lucrative. The counts rented their estates, and the tenants were counting every penny. We had to work harder and harder, so that the tenant could earn as much as possible. Suddenly cheap grain came from abroad, and the price of the grain dropped. Every few years we got less money.”

“You can't imagine it nowadays, Gyula, but in the past all servants, who were in fact still serfs, had a small piece of land for a kitchen garden, and to grow potatoes. We all had quite a lot of chickens, a few pigs, and a cow which could graze for free, because there was enough pasture. Your grandmother sold every year I don't know how many piglets, and eggs on the village market.” Grandpa has to laugh, when he remembers a funny story about piglets grandma drove to the village, to finish with: “Well,

fortunately, I have my bees, they provide me with some pocket money.”

### Source

The book *People of the Puszta* (1936) from the Hungarian author Gyula Illyés is a blend of an autobiography and an anthropological study, with numerous small stories about what Illyés saw and experienced himself in his youth.

Part 1: As free as a bird - an estate in Hungary – 1910 (1), story 52.

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## **57. A hamlet in New South Wales, Australia – 1914 (1)**

### **Forest Fire**

The situation is desperate. It is so hot, the flames burn the hair on the hands and arms of the men from the hamlet Durilgai. Their eyes are red and weeping, the smoke burns in their throat and lungs. And what in fact can they accomplish? They have fastened bags to sticks with iron wire, and with them they beat out the flames like mad. At least, that is what they try to do. But the flames are clever, again and again they know how to reach some grass and withered twigs, and crawl further. Till they arrive again at tinder-dry bush, which a moment later burns like a torch. Or at a pine tree, which is coated in resin, and will go up in smoke as well.

A group of children with bare feet comes running up. They are from the hamlet and head for the sweating men. They are out of breath, and can only utter a single word. But the men do understand it quite well. While they were trying to stop the fire here, the wind has blown the forest fire from the other side to their farms and huts. They look at each other. They are defeated. They put a chew of tobacco in their mouth. But a few moments later, they still untie their horses, which are eager to leave, and ride to the hamlet.

The fire has indeed arrived frighteningly close to a few farms. In the meantime it has become dark. Actually it is a bewitching view, all these golden-yellow and orange flames, which crawl up into the trees, and throw down burning branches. The men strike here and there at some creeping flames on the ground. But they are too tired. They almost don't know what they're doing any more. Often they gaze into the flames, like they want to walk right into them. They are lost.

Then, suddenly, one of the children shouts. He has caught a drop on his hand, which glitters like a diamond. And another drop, and another. The children laugh. A lightning flash, and a deafening thunderbolt. And then it rains countless life-saving drops. The men, women and children walk back to their huts and farms. For days it smells of ash. Soon, little green blades raise their heads everywhere.

### Source

In the novel *The tree of man* (1956) the Australian author Patrick White describes in an almost poetic way the lives and feelings of a farmer and his wife on a small farm.

Part 2: Failure - a hamlet in New South Wales, Australia – about 1935 (2), story 87.

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## 58. The pampas of Argentina – 1916

### My padrino

Amazing, how much I am indebted to Don Segundo Sombra, my *padrino*, my mentor, my guardian. Five years now I have been a *gaucho*, a cowboy. Everything I know, and everything I can do, I owe to him.

I remember very well when I saw him for the first time in my village. I must have been about twelve years old at the time, and had dropped out of school. I was roaming the streets, catching fish in the small river which I sold to the innkeeper, and getting up to some mischief with my pals. Until I saw that big tough man on his splendid horse, with his lasso and big hat. At the inn I heard what his name was, and that he was going to the *estancia*, the big ranch, of Don Galván to look for work.

In the night I snuck out from home, and walked to the *estancia*. There, I got some work: picking up garbage with a pony, and a hundred other chores. Much to my joy, Don Segundo was hired also, to break a few wild horses. What authority he had over such a powerful animal. How he managed to saddle it, and then to sit down carefully but confidently on his back. How supplely he absorbed the bucking and jumping and managed to stay in the saddle. How he let the horse spend its fury till it was completely exhausted, to then impose his will on it.

At supper I tried to make some small talk with Don Segundo. But that was not easy, because he didn't say much. Still, I sensed that we had a connection. Gradually his affection for me grew. When after a few weeks the horses were tamed and he moved on, I asked him if I could go along with him.

For five years now I have been with my *padrino*. He has taught me everything: how to catch wild horses with a lasso, how to saw off the horn of a bull that is growing almost into its eye, how to treat an inflamed hoof with herbs, or sick kidneys by laying on warm mud. He helped me gather a *gaucho* outfit: a herd of six horses, a big poncho to protect me against rain and cold, and a belt to support me while riding for days. Patiently he taught me the special skills of horse breaking, and explained to me how to avoid fights in bars. I learned everything, truly everything, from him, down to the most marvellous *gaucho* songs and the movements of *gaucho* dances.

#### Source

The charming novel *Don Segundo Sombra* (1926) from the Argentinian writer Ricardo Güiraldes finely portrays the *gaucho* life.

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## 59. Romania – autumn 1917 (1)

### Deserters

It is late October, it is evening, and it is cold. Mishka Koshevoy lies together with some other Cossacks in a corner of a corn field. A small white cloud escapes from his mouth. He would love to light up a cigarette, but the sergeant has strictly forbidden smoking. The glowing red spots could betray them.

Mishka, a young farm hand with brown curls and red cheeks, is a Cossack from the Don Valley, in Southern Russia. At the start of the World War he was sent to the front to fight as a Russian soldier against the Germans and Austrians. After a short period of big attacks and counter attacks, the fighting has turned into a horrible, sustained trench warfare. Finally, Mishka's Cossack regiment has been pulled back a few dozen kilometres from the front to recover their breath. Now their mission is to catch deserters.

Despite all of this, Mishka is usually in the mood for a funny story, but not tonight. He longs for his village. The war has lasted already so long, and so many comrades have already died. It seems as though it will never end. And, what is it for? What he wants more than anything is to run away, to desert, and to get to his village in the Don valley.

Then they hear a soft sound. The sergeant makes a motion with his arm to keep quiet. A group of men trudge along the path. When they are close to them, the sergeant leaps up and fires a shot into the air. "Halt," he shouts. It indeed turns out to be a group of deserters. They are a sight: hunched over like old men, their clothes worn out, their shoes in shreds, with filthy caps on their heads.

The sergeant wants to take the miserable group of soldiers to the military staff, where they will be punished, and then sent again to the front line. The demoralized men threaten with a hand grenade and with their rusty bayonets, and refuse to come along. Pathetically, they offer some money and a bottle of vodka.

Mishka can't endure it any longer, and whispers to the sergeant, "Why don't you let them go? After some time we will run away too. Why should we make trouble?" The sergeant looks at him, and sees that Mishka means it. He just lets them go. So many stories are being told about officers who are killed by their own men.

#### Source

In his 1500 page, monumental novel *And Quiet Flows the Don* (1928-1940), the Russian author Mikhail Sholokhov describes the First World War through the eyes of peasant boys.

Part 2: A shepherd joins the Reds - Steppe in the Don Valley, Southern Russia – spring 1918 (2), story 61.

Part 3: The civil war is still not over - a hamlet in the Don Valley, Southern Russia – summer 1920 (3), story 64.

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## **60. A remote village in Norway – 1917**

### **Pioneer**

Actually this is a deserted area. There is still a narrow path, but hardly anyone goes there. Perhaps someone coming from one faraway village, and going to another to visit family. Or a few Lapps searching for a lost reindeer. But no one else. Still, a small, stocky, muscular young man with a rust-coloured beard is roaming around here. His name is Isaac, and he is in good spirits. Why shouldn't he be? The forest is beautiful here, it is springtime, the birds are singing ardently, the mountain pastures are full of flowers, and in the distance a small stream gurgles.

Isaac likes this place. This is no-man's-land. Nobody lives here. He could start his own farm here.

There is quite a lot of forest with fire wood, and enough big, straight trees, which he can use as beams. The stream is not that wide, but quite deep, and it flows so strongly that it will for sure have water during the whole year. There are mountain pastures nearby where he can make a lot of hay, when he has livestock in due time. The marshes are also suitable: not too sandy, with enough peat. He will have to drain them. That means: digging ditches. A lot of work, hard work. But that's not a problem for Isaac.

Isaac takes his time. He traverses the whole area, and considers everything. In the evening he eats something from his knapsack, and sleeps on a rock that is still warm from the sun. The next day he again goes through the area that he has in mind. Meanwhile he collects a big load of bast to sell in the village, which is a several-hour walk. With the money he earns by that, he buys food and a spade to dig ditches. Then, he walks back, again for hours. He cuts sod, and builds a hut of it. He has at least now a dry place to sleep when it rains. Tomorrow he will start digging ditches, so that the marsh can dry well. It will certainly become a good field.

At night, when he is lying comfortably in his newly built hut, he asks himself if he could find a woman to do together all the farm work he has in mind. What woman would like to live in such an isolated, remote place? Nevertheless, this is the best place to start a new farm. Then, Isaac falls asleep.

#### Source

The book *Growth of the soil* (1917) written by the Norwegian author Knut Hamsun shows how a peasant and his wife, who own nothing, succeed in building up a prosperous farm, although it is not a path strewn with roses. Hamsun writes about the differences between the life in the city and in rural areas, and chooses straightly for the latter.

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### **61. Steppe in the Don Valley, Southern Russia – spring 1918 (2)**

#### **A shepherd joins the Reds**

Smiling and daydreaming, Mishka Koshevoy plods along on his mare. How beautiful the steppe is now in the spring, and how angry I was yesterday at Soldatov, I could have beaten him to death. When Mishka remembers it, riding in the sun with the rustling of the wind, the singing of the birds, the chirping of the marmots, he has to laugh, but yesterday he was steaming mad. “You are nothing but a Bolshevik”, that old Soldatov had barked at him, “you want to sell off our land to the devil. You should all be hanged. I will report you to the boss.” In a rage, Mishka had grabbed him by his collar, and he had even raised his fist. Fortunately he came to his senses just in time, and a while later he even made it up to him, because, well, he isn't a bad guy. But, the rich farmers stir everyone up against the Reds. And of course such an ignorant nature guy like Soldatov falls for it.

It is spring 1918. The Russian revolution is half a year old. An intense civil war is raging in the Don Valley in Southern Russia. The northern districts sided with the Reds, but the southern districts want autonomy and look for cooperation with the Whites, who want to wipe out the Bolsheviks in all of Russia. Many poor peasant boys from the southern districts secretly have left for the north to enlist in the Red army. Now they fight against their own fellow countrymen. Because of all the violent incidents from both sides, the resentment is growing from week to week.



Mishka is a cheerful young man with a light beard, from a farm worker family in a southern district. I've have a good life here, he muses, but it is time for me to join the Reds in the north, like all these other peasant boys from the village. Because there *must* be equality, and no longer bosses and servants. We *have* to drive out these big farmers. Let me just save up some food, and then I will leave.

### Source

In his 1500 page, monumental novel *And Quiet Flows the Don* (1928-1940), the Russian author Mikhail Sholokhov describes the civil war in rural areas, just after the Russian revolution.

Part 1: Deserters - Romania – autumn 1917 (1), story 59.

Part 3: The civil war is still not over - a hamlet in the Don Valley, Southern Russia – summer 1920 (3), story 64.

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## **62. Morelos, South Mexico – 1919**

### **Zapata, the beloved peasant leader**

Five horsemen in uniform on brown horses ride into the *plaza*, the central square of the sleepy town. They look rough. The first rider has the body of a man on his horse in front of him. Some shabbily dressed Indian women stand by a flower stall, and a few men with big hats and the mud-stained white clothes of Indian peasants are in front of a pub. “The *rurales*” one of them hisses. Quickly everyone looks the other way, because one wrong glance in the direction of the brutal rural police, and they will hit you with their whip, or worse.

In the middle of the *plaza* the first rider dismounts, and throws the dead body on the ground. “There you have your 'hero' Zapata. With all your insolent heroes, it will go the same way.” Nobody reacts. Only when the riders are gone do the Indian men and women walk toward the body. One woman from the flower stall brings a few bunches of flowers with her.

Lazaro, an older Indian man with a rugged white stubbly beard, examines the dead body carefully. It is covered with blood, and has dozens of gunshot wounds, also in the face. Everyone keeps silent. Then, Lazaro gets up and spits on the ground. “Nobody can fool me,” he shouts, with a faint smile. “I've known him from the time he was a child, when we guarded the cornfields against the crows together. I was there during the first land occupation, with so many expeditions and battles. I know him through and through, and I tell you, this isn't Emiliano Zapata at all.”

The other ones look at the old peasant questioningly, and then everybody starts telling about what they have experienced with their beloved, heroic leader. How they have struggled together for years against the large landowners, the *rurales* and the federal forces to get their land back. With varying degrees of success.

Finally, the *federales* have captured Zapata, and riddled him with bullets. But for the Indian peasants of Morelos, Zapata is not dead. That simply cannot be true. “I know where Zapata is,” Lazaro says, “he is hiding out in the mountains. He is looking at how we can defend ourselves against the large landowners. When we really need it, he will help us. We can count on that.”

### Source

The Hollywood action movie *Viva Zapata!* (1952) made by the American director Elia Kazan shows the life of the Mexican peasant leader Emiliano Zapata, and also how the Indian peasants want to do whatever it takes to regain their land from the big landowners. The impressive screenplay is by John Steinbeck.

\* \* \*

## **63. A small village in Wales, United Kingdom – 1919**

### **Gas masks**

“Piss off, you,” says an elderly farmer with grey bristly eyebrows to Jim of the Rock. “No, no, really,” Jim insists, “thanks to me we won the war. Look here.” He pulls a wrinkled envelope out of his shabby dark green jacket, with a letter from a general in it, and a picture of him with two mules. All three of them are wearing a gas mask.

Jim is from a very small farm, 'The Rock'. He is not that big, red-haired and freckled. In 1914 he volunteered for the army. He was fed up with farm-work, and with his short-tempered father. In the army Jim took care of a group of mules. Miraculously he succeeded in staying unharmed until just before the end of the war, when he got a few shell splinters in both of his legs. For a long time the doctors considered amputating his legs, but in the end it was not necessary. Since then Jim walks with difficulty, in fact he hobbles.

When Jim returned to The Rock, he wasn't the same any more. All he talked about was the war. He was playing his flute a bit in the farmyard, and hanging out at village pubs, where people soon became tired of his stories. On the farm he didn't do a stroke of work any longer, much to the anger of his father.

“Do you see those animals in the picture? I felt so bad for them. When there was a gas attack, they all died. I said to the sergeant, 'Why do we have gas masks and *they* not? Why do they have to die?' The sergeant wrote a letter to the general, and then gas masks arrived for the animals. Look, here is the thank-you letter from the general. The Krauts didn't have them. Their animals still died. Later on they did give the mules gas masks, but then it was already too late, then they had almost lost the war.”

“Yes, son,” the elderly farmer answers, “have a pint on me. It has not been easy for you. But now, the war is over.”

### Source

*On the black hill* (1982) written by the English author Bruce Chatwin is a touching novel about twins on a medium-sized farm. It also pays some attention to the life of peasants in the region.

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## **64. A hamlet in the Don Valley, Southern Russia – summer 1920 (3)**

### **The civil war is still not over**

Softly, Mishka Koshevoy, a young soldier, knocks on the door. Without waiting for a response, he enters the kitchen of the farm. “Good afternoon, aunty Ilynichna”. Surprised, the old woman farmer turns around, and her face transforms into a storm cloud. Silently she turns again, and goes on kneading the bread dough. Mishka sits down at the table. “How are things going here?” Ilynichna responds, without turning around, “We didn't miss you much, you had better leave”. Mishka keeps calm, he was expecting harsh words.

When the door of the sitting room opens, his eyes light up. There she is, Dunyashka, the daughter of Ilynichna. For her he came back to the village, for her he will endure the spitefulness of the old woman. “Good afternoon,” Mishka says again, but now much more timidly. Shyly, Dunyashka lowers her gaze, walks up to him, sits down, and silently takes his hand in hers.

For two years a terrible civil war has raged in the Don Valley in Southern Russia. Mishka, a farm worker's son, joined the Reds, the Soviet army, to defeat the Whites, who wanted to destroy the newly born Soviet state. But many sons of richer farmers here fought on the side of the Whites.

– “How dare you to face me,” Ilynichna growls, “you murderer!”  
– “Please, little mother”, Mishka responds, “why are you so hostile to me?”  
– “I am not at all your 'little mother'! Didn't you murder Pyotr, my very own son?”  
– “I killed him, that's true, but it was war. If he had captured me, he would have killed me too. Just like that. And, if I am a 'murderer', then that sweet darling son of yours is a 'mass murderer'; how many Reds he has cut down? ...”

Then Dunyashka begins to cry, “Will it never end? Leave him alone, Mama, otherwise I will run away with him.” Furiously, Ilynichna turns around and goes on kneading.

#### Source

In his 1500 page, monumental novel *And Quiet Flows the Don* (1928-1940), the Russian author Mikhail Sholokhov describes the civil war in rural areas, just after the Russian revolution.

Part 1: Deserters - Romania – autumn 1917 (1), story 59.

Part 2: A shepherd joins the Reds - Steppe in the Don Valley, Southern Russia – spring 1918 (2), story 61.

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## **65. A hacienda in Veracruz, Mexico – 1920**

### **La Rosa Blanca**

“A very warm welcome to you, *señor gobernador*, Mr. Governor, at *hacienda* La Rosa Blanca!” Jacinto Yañez beams with pleasure. There is nothing better than receiving visitors, and this time such a distinguished gentleman from the city. The governor looks kindly at Jacinto, and all the Indian women, children and men who have gathered around them. After a brief conversation, the governor together with Jacinto visits all the huts to meet the families. Here he strokes a small girl on her head, there he takes a toddler in his arms, and everywhere he hands out coins and sweets. He enjoys walking around on the *hacienda*, the estate, and looking at everything: the corn and sugar cane fields, the vegetable gardens, the communal pasture where the horses and mules graze, the forest with the stream where the women wash the clothes. He wants to see everything.

The governor finds himself in an awkward predicament. Last week he was visited by an important *licenciado*, an authorized agent, who complained that Jacinto didn't want to sell the *hacienda* to an American oil company for drilling. Even not for a very good price. Jacinto had been very obstinate. In his opinion he *can* not sell the *hacienda*. Officially he may be the owner, but in fact he is only the head of a community of sixty Indian families, which have lived here several centuries from generation to generation. This is their world, and he does not have the right to drive them out of it. So, he will not sell the *hacienda*, not even for a million. His ancestors would be furious with him, and his life would not be worth living any more.

The governor can understand Jacinto quite well, but the state of Mexico has a huge need for oil dollars, to rebuild and modernise the country after a long and bloody civil war. What should he do? He has been often been on *haciendas*, but these were all owned by white Mexicans from the city, for whom the estate was no more than a source of income, where a harsh manager held sway over a group of impoverished Indians. La Rosa Blanca is different, it is a simple, but pleasant, peaceful community.

In the evening the governor is sitting at a big bonfire together with Jacinto. All the people of the *hacienda* are sitting quietly around them. The governor and Jacinto talk about all sorts of things: about the different families, the mules and the corn, about the home-woven clothes, and the songs the children sing. But they don't talk about politics, because Jacinto doesn't know exactly who the president of the republic is, and he doesn't care.

The governor has never had such a beautiful evening. Slowly an idea develops in his head how he can save La Rosa Blanca, because it should never be lost. Then, the dancing starts. After a while the governor is dancing too.

#### Source

The novel *The White Rose* (1929), written by the German author Ben Traven, depicts two entirely different worlds: that of a tremendously rich American oil tycoon, and that of an Indian peasant community. The contrast couldn't be more glaring.

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## **66. Mongolia – 1920 – film**

### **Partisans**

If Bair dislikes anyone, then it's that greedy English fur trader. He has just snatched away that splendid beautiful fur from him! He could have had it, if he had only paid a fair price for it. But he had thrown no more than ten silver coins on the counter, not even a quarter of the pelt's worth. But he had gotten what he deserved.

Bair is a usually calm and pleasant Mongolian, almost thirty years old. He is a nomad, a herdsman, and lives together with his wife, their two sons, and his old father and mother in a big, round tent. But he is also a fur trapper. Recently, he had been able to trap a beautiful silver fox. When the fur trader snatched away his fur, he furiously jumped over the counter to take it back. But the trader didn't let him do that, and it resulted in a fight, in which Bair in the end killed the man.

Someone notified the English garrison, and immediately about twenty horsemen arrived with guns at the fur shop. Luckily, Bair was able to escape through the back door. Jumping from ice floe to ice floe, he managed to reach the other side of the river and disappear into the mountains. There he encountered a group of partisans. They took him to their camp. They tell him that they are on the side of the Soviets, the Reds, and that they would like nothing better than to drive out the English.

While Bair is talking with his new comrades, a partisan comes running into the camp. He is out of breath. “The English are ransacking the villages to take livestock away everywhere, as punishment because nobody handed over the murderer of the fur trader.” Everyone takes his gun, and runs to his horse. Someone points Bair toward a horse, and away he goes. Together they will teach the English a lesson.

#### Source

*Storm over Asia* (1928) is a great, rich movie from the Russian director Vsevolod Pudovkin.

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### **67. Taurus Mountains, Turkey – around 1920**

#### **The good bandit**

There is a roll of drums and clarion-call – the farmers are dancing deliriously with joy. It is a big party in Değirmenoluk. Finally, the fields are again in the hands of the villagers, like in olden times. Nobody has to give half of his harvest to Abdi ağa (lord Abdi), the large landowner, any longer. He has fled to the city. So afraid he is for Little Memed, the big, fearless bandit.

Normally, the villagers are terrified of robber gangs who loot the villages. They are a nuisance in the entire Taurus area, and the government leaves them more or less undisturbed.

Little Memed is an other sort of bandit. He is born and bred in Değirmenoluk. Abdi ağa has treated him and his mother horribly. After a shooting with the ağa, Memed has fled to the mountains as young as he was. He has joined an infamous gang. Later on, he has set up his own gang with a few good bandits.

Now Memed has come back to his village to kill the cruel ağa and to give back the land to the peasants. Until he is dead, he decides, he will stay with his mates in the village to protect it.

#### Source

The Turkish author Yaşar Kemal describes in *Memed, My Hawk* (1958) the life in a small village. Kemal builds on the old stories the villagers continue telling each other from generation to generation. He combines the heroic story with beautiful descriptions of nature.

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### **68. South-east Nigeria – the 1920s**

#### **The high priest stands alone**

What is a high priest of Ulu to do? For Ezeulu, from the village of Umuaro, this is not a difficult question. He is the high priest of Ulu, and he knows what his duty is. Quite simply, he has to do what Ulu asks him. Nothing more or less. He is 'an arrow on the bow of god' as the Igbo say. And being a high priest, he has to take the lead, and show his people the right path. Even when nobody understands him and when he stands entirely alone.

Ezeulu has sent his son Oduche to the Christians. 'To be my eyes and my ears', he explained. He wants to know exactly how the whites think, how they organize themselves, and what their new projects are. In this manner, it is perhaps possible to manoeuvre in such a way that a bit of their autonomy will be saved. Times have changed. Now the white men are the rulers. Each year, they strengthen their grip on the villages.

The people are not grateful to Ezeulu for sending his son to the Christians. The traditional ones suspect him of trying to find favour with the whites.

The minister of the Christian church in Umuaro is Mr. Goodcountry. He is an African from another part of Nigeria. He strongly encourages disagreement among the villagers who are on the side of Ezeulu, traditional ones who don't want to give in an inch, and those who have joined the Christians. They have already turned their backs on the traditional god Ulu.

Ulu does not surrender easily. By the mouth of his high priest, he refuses to proclaim the start of the harvest. The yams rot away in the earth. A famine comes forth. The people of Umuaro are desperate. They are furious with Ezeulu. As a massive crowd, they go over to the Christians. Goodcountry promises them that his god will protect them against the wrath of Ulu. Ezeulu stands alone.

#### Source

In *Arrow of God* (1964), the Nigerian author Chinua Achebe describes carefully and with a lot of sympathy the village life in the land of the Igbo. He focuses on the tensions between the ones who want to stick to their old customs at any cost and the ones who thoughtlessly want to join the white men.

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### **69. A village in Northern Italy – 1920 (2) – *film***

#### **The cavalry unit turns around**

“Orèèèste, Orèèèste,” the voice sounds, long and drawn-out, from the other side of the canal, “go away, leave. Listen to me. The devils on horseback are coming to catch you. Go away.” Oreste, a peasant with a lean face and a grey cap, looks inquiringly in the direction of the sound. When he looks further around, he sees a large group of horsemen in the distance. He goes red with anger, and smashes his cap onto the ground. “I have lived here for forty years, I have worked here for thirty-two years. I won't leave. Not for anybody, not even for God, Jesus and Maria themselves.”

It is autumn, Saint Martin's Day; dozens of farmworkers and peasants, men, women and children, walk to the village for the festival. While Oreste is shouting and shaking his fist, his wife Nella calls out to people passing by. “They want to evict us from our land. But we have a lease contract. Where will we go with our children?”

Agriculture, as it had been, is in a poor state. Big threshers and other new equipment make many farmworkers dispensable. Railroads and large iron ships drive the grain prices down by cheap imports from far away. Large landowners lower the wages for the farmworkers and raise the rents for the peasants. When they find you troublesome, they turn you out, contract or no contract. When there is resistance, they ask for the assistance of the army.

“In the name of the law, leave your farm,” calls the captain of the cavalry unit to Oreste high from his horse. “Which law?” shouts Oreste back, “the law is always on the side of the *padrone*, but where can I sleep with the children?” “In the prison, if you don't leave immediately,” the captain answers drily. Then, he turns around and rides back to the unit waiting a short distance away. “Draw your swords,” he shouts, and twenty-five swords rise into the sky, “forward march!”

In the meantime, Nella has succeeded in gathering together about eighty people. Oreste shouts to the men, “Come here, take all these poles, then we can defend ourselves, all together!” When the horsemen are approaching, Nella moves forward with the women, singing together socialistic songs about the union. Then, they sit down while singing, and a moment later they even lie down. Behind them the men stand, holding the long poles threateningly. They are also singing.

At the last moment the captain shouts the command to stop. He doesn't want to have a massacre. The situation in the country is already so tense that this could become the spark to the tinder, and then he would be blamed for it. The cavalry unit turns around.

#### Source

The masterful, five-hour-long movie *1900* (1976), from the Italian director Bernardo Bertolucci tells the story of the big changes in the lives of peasants in the first half of the twentieth century; the great agricultural strike of 1908, mechanisation, fascism, resistance and liberation.

Part 1: Olmo is growing up - an estate in Northern Italy – 1910 (1), story 53.

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### **70. Mountain region in Peru – around 1920 (1)**

#### **Shadow-puma**

It is a pitch-dark night. Barking loudly, five sturdy dogs leap over the fence of the sheep-fold, and run out onto the field. They surely have heard a wild animal, and will attack it now. Simón Robles, an older peasant with a pencil-thin moustache and little grey goatee, goes together with his wife and two children to the sheep shed, and sits down there to protect their animals. Foxes are cunning; when the dogs are gone, they can seize the opportunity to catch a chicken or a lamb. Perhaps even a puma is roaming about, who wouldn't mind killing a sheep.

In the sheep shed, it is even darker, if possible, than outside, although the eyes of the sheep light up like small yellow lamps. Simón puts a few coca leaves in his mouth, chews a bit, and starts, as he often does, to tell a story. “Long ago, our great forefather Adam lived in paradise. He lacked for nothing. Everywhere hung the most delicious fruits, and he had only to reach out his hand to pick a few. Still, he wasn't content, you know how people are. When, one day God dropped by for a visit, Adam lamented,

'Why does it always become night? Can't it stay day forever?' 'The night is to sleep,' God answered. 'I am afraid during the night,' Adam said, 'the beasts can attack me.' God had to laugh about that: 'I created the animals in such a way that they don't harm anybody, you know that, don't you?' 'But still, I am afraid,' Adam insisted."

God settled down comfortably and then pointed toward an enormous black puma behind Adam. Adam was frightened, because the puma stood ready to pounce, his mouth stretched wide open. His white teeth gleamed in the sunlight. Then, the puma jumped. But, he didn't jump *on* Adam, but *over* him into the sky, and then he was gone. 'Look,' God said with a smile, 'it was not a really puma, only a shadow-puma. And you are afraid of that?' God shook his head gently."

"It's the same way with us," Simón goes on, "how often are we not scared about a puma, who is actually no more than a shadow-puma." When after a long time the dogs come back, without having fought, Simón is obliged to say, "It must have been a shadow-puma."

### Source

The book *The hungry dogs* (1939) from the Peruvian writer *Ciro Alegría* tells about the peasant life in the Andes Mountains.

Part 2: Famine - mountain region in Peru – around 1922 (2), story 73.

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## **71. A small village near a fjord in Iceland – 1921**

### **The founding of a union**

"Dear fellows, that's why we're founding a union tonight!" The thin young man from Reykjavik in his wrinkled grey suit looks around the village hall with blazing eyes. "Poverty has to end now. Why should you be hungry, why are small children dying here like flies? It is because shipowner Bogesen is underpaying you. You catch the fish, you are at risk of drowning at sea, the women are working till they burst at the fish cleaning company, and who is getting away with the profit? Bogesen."

Salka Valka, a young fisherwoman, is listening attentively. That man is right. Bogesen is rich, and the fishing families are dirt-poor. How nicely he explains everything. At the same time he is learned and inspired, the sparks are flying. What a beautiful world is there for the taking!

"In Russia the proletarians have expelled the capitalists and their mercenaries. Now they are building a new society there, with beautiful enterprises from the workers themselves, with hospitals and libraries. At last the workers get nice houses with running water and electricity. Peoples' sports halls and peoples' culture centres are springing up there."

Salka Valka wakes up from her dreams. Suddenly she is the down-to-earth everyday fisherwoman. She stands up and says, "I want to ask you a question. You talk about wage increase, but Bogesen has said that he will never accept that. He will never give in to a strike. What will we do then, when no one of us has an income, when there is no money to buy food? Bogesen can hold out for a long time, he has plenty of money. But we fishermen can't."



Once Salka Valka has started talking, she cannot stop any more. “Please, stop these dream stories about running water and electricity. Earlier we had here the Salvation Army; they told us that singing psalms and shouting 'hallelujah' would solve all our problems. And now you bother us with strike and revolution, which will resolve all our troubles. But here, we are fishermen. We are dependent on fish. Words are cheap, but we can't use these hazy dreams.”

“Let him go to Russia, that troublemaker,” someone calls from the back of the hall. “Death to the capitalists and their servants,” sounds from another side. Someone hits another, and the other one hits back. There is pushing and pulling, shouting and cursing. The activist from the capital squeezes himself out of the hall. The same evening a union is founded on the field in front of the village hall.

#### Source

*O Thou Pure Vine* (1931) and *The Bird on the Beach* (1932) are two splendid novels written by the Icelandic author Halldór Laxness about the hard life of small fishermen, and are at the same time a touching love story.

\* \* \*

## **72. A remote farm in the marshlands of Iceland – 1922 (3)**

### **Rich for a few years**

Not once does Bjartur of Summerhouses look back. He walks with his old Blaze on the reins onto the big new road, in the direction of the mountains, which loom blue in the morning mist. Twenty-three years he has lived here, and seen both prosperity and misery. But he doesn't look back once. Last week his land was sold by public auction, together with his stables, because he couldn't pay his loans. Jón the Bailiff, the big landowner of the Rauðsmýri estate, has bought the land of Bjartur with the marshes, the pastures, and the stables.

Bjartur had never had debts. He carefully saved his money, and spent it prudently to expand his farm with a shed here, and a stable there. And suddenly there was prosperity, wealth. Far-away warmongering countries were at one another's throat, and a brutal war broke out in which millions of people were killed. The prices of meat and wool boomed, and suddenly poor Iceland was rich, and the peasants became well-to-do.

The government built a big road next to Bjartur's farm. Banks were competing to pass loans off on the peasants. Clever agents of builders visited the farms to persuade the ever-frugal peasants to build a real concrete house this time. Politicians promised all sort of subsidies to farmers to expand and modernise.

Long ago, when his daughter Sola, his favourite child – 'the flower of my life' as Bjartur called her – was very sad about their poverty, he had promised her to build 'one day' a splendid house, nicer than that of Jón the Bailiff. Now, he saw his chance. He didn't understand much about the different loans with all their conditions, but the livestock prices were good, so it would be all right.

The dream of prosperity went on for six years, then the prices collapsed, and one peasant after another went bankrupt. Bjartur's aged mother-in-law had still a small piece of land in Grithut, a very remote hamlet. There, he has again built a sod hut, a small farm, with a stable downstairs for his animals, and

upstairs under the sloped roof a living-room.

Bjartur walks with old Blaze. In a sedan-chair at one side sits his old mother-in-law, and on the other side the two little children of Sola, his beloved daughter, for whom he would sacrifice anything. Bjartur doesn't look back, not once. In Grithut he will go on with his sheep.

### Source

*Independent People* (1934) by the Icelandic writer Halldór Laxness is a monumental novel about small sheep farmers: powerful and moving.

Part 1: The reindeer - a remote farm in the marshlands of Iceland – 1899 (1), story 32.

Part 2: Independent after thirty years - a remote farm in the marshlands of Iceland – 1911 (2), story 54.

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## **73. Mountain region in Peru – around 1922 (2)**

### **Famine**

Laboriously, little Damián trudges up the hill. He is only nine years old. Behind him Mañu plods along, a devoted sheepdog with black-brown fleecy fur and glazed eyes. Damián is hungry, and Mañu too. When Damian gets to the top of the hill, he puts his hands to his mouth, and shouts several times, “Mama, taita.” Except for a faint echo, there is only silence. A few days ago Damián had roasted the last barley, and shared it with his good friend Mañu. Mama had told him to wait for *taita*, daddy. But he never turned up. She told him that she would return soon with food. But if it took too long, and the food was all gone, he should go to grandpa Simón. That's why he left home this morning, together with Mañu.

A terrible famine has swept the land. Almost no rain has fallen for the past two years. Martina, the mother of Damián, is on her own. Her husband Mateo was captured by soldiers from the city as a recruit. When there was almost no food any more, Martina had slaughtered one of the sheep, and after that, another, and another. When they had eaten the last sheep, she went to the father of Mateo. Perhaps, he would have something to eat. She could have taken Damián along with her, but he should wait for Mateo, in case he got out of the service. If he didn't find anyone at home, he could be lost for ever.

Stumbling, Damián walks on the path. He has to cross over three mountains. When he is tired, he sits down for a short time. Mañu licks his hand, to give him courage. Then, they move on. In the afternoon Damián sits down on a rock under a leafless tree. Something just collapses inside him. He slumps down. Mañu pushes his muzzle against him. Softly, he whimpers. Damián doesn't open his eyes any more.

### Source

The book *The hungry dogs* (1939) from the Peruvian writer Ciro Alegría tells about the peasant life in the Andes Mountains.

Part 1: Shadow-puma - mountain region in Peru – around 1920 (1), story 70.

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## 74. Anatolia, Turkey – 1922

### Black bombs

In the moonlight, the bullock carts drive on. Women walk alongside the farm carts with their solid oak wheels. This time, no golden grain lies on the carts. Instead, they are filled with black bombs. Sometimes a baby well wrapped up is sleeping on top of the bombs. The women continue in silence; they go on endlessly. In this way, they brought the ammunition to the place where the new Turkish army would start the decisive counter-attack to expel the intruders.

At the end of the First World War French, Greek and other armies occupied big parts of Anatolia. An army of the Turkish independence movement, mostly peasants, drove the occupiers away.

#### Source

The beautiful epic *Human Landscapes from My Country* (1966) from the Turkish poet Nâzım Hikmet paints with a lot of anecdotes the life of poor Turks in the first half of the twentieth century. A few of his stories are about peasants.

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## 75. Savanna region, Nigeria – about 1925

### Sokugo, the wandering disease

As soon as she sees her mother coming, Sheibe leaps to her feet and runs to her. “Mama, Mama,” the dark girl with the small braids shouts, and wraps her arms around her, “Daddy has run away.” Then she starts sobbing. Shaitu, a lanky Fula woman of about 40 years old, looks, astonished, at her daughter. “What’s going on?” she asks herself. That morning she had walked with some calabashes of milk to the nearby town to sell it door-to-door. Mai Sunsaye, her somewhat older husband, was at that moment sitting in front of his hut, reading the Qur’an.

“Be quiet, my girl,” Shaitu tries to calm down her daughter, and together with her she walks to the hut of Sunsaye. To her surprise, she sees that the books have been slammed closed hastily, and that the inkwell has fallen down. There is no trace to be found of her husband.

In fits and starts Sheibe tells what has happened. Toward the end of the morning a man had come. He was carrying a cage with a dove in it. Stealthily he had crept to the bushes behind the huts and released the dove there. The dove had something white on its leg. A few moments later, her father became restless, and without saying a word, he followed after the bird, further and further away. Sheibe had called him again and again, but her father didn’t even look back. Once again, Sheibe sobs.

Shaitu moans. That man, about whom Sheibe is talking, is Ardo, a nasty fellow who cannot accept that Sunsaye was chosen as village head. And Sunsaye has, as she realises now, the *Sokugo*, the wandering disease. That ‘something white’ on the dove’s leg was a piece of parchment with a dangerous spell written on it. It causes a usually tranquil man to start wandering restlessly through the savanna. At night it is dangerous there, with wild cattle, cobras, panthers, and sometimes even a lion.

What should she do? Shaitu doesn't know. She needs to find her husband, to take him to a sorcerer who can free him from the spell with an herbal decoction or something else. At sunset, when Rikku, her son, returns with the herd, she will speak with him how to rescue Sunsaye.

#### Source

*Burning Grass* (1962) from the Nigerian writer Cyprian Ekwensi is a short but thrilling adventure novel about the nomadic way of life.

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### **76. A mountain village in Peru – 1926 (2)**

#### **Moving**

“Dear people,” Ambrosio Luma says in concluding the village meeting, “let us start moving early tomorrow morning. We have much to do, it is already mid-October, and soon the winter storm season will begin. Before then, we should have built our houses, a big shed for our sheep, and two corrals for the cows and horses.” Most people nod, and all of them walk home in silence.

Ambrosio is a sturdily built Indian about thirty-five years old with a clear gaze, a mason, a hard worker, a practical man. His last remark, when in fact the village head had already closed the meeting, helps people to overcome their despair. Tomorrow will be a new day, a day on which they all together will begin a new life.

Yesterday evening, Rosendo Maqui, the village head, together with four council members, returned silently and with bowed heads from the provincial capital. At once everyone understood that what they feared for so long now had become reality. In front of his house, Rosendo addressed the villagers: the judge had allotted their fields and pastures to a *ranchero*, a big farmer. Only the Yanañahui highlands were left to them.

The next day there was a village meeting. Things get quite heated. One group wants to resist, to fight. Another group thinks that doesn't make sense, because they have hardly any weapons, and because the *ranchero* no doubt will come with a sizeable group of policemen armed with guns. Rosendo calmly advocates moving to the highland. Finally there is a vote, and a large majority chooses to move.

Two days later the villagers have transported most of their belongings to the new location. They have driven all their livestock there. With tears in their eyes, they think of the good memories of their years in the green valley. In the new highland terrain, Ambrosio walks up and down vigorously, advising and giving directions on where the new houses will need to be. For now, there is no time to mourn.

#### Source

The beautiful novel *Broad and Alien is the World* (1941) from the Peruvian author Ciro Alegría describes in 600 pages all the facets of Indian peasant life.

Part 1: 'Saint Isidore, don't desert us!' - a mountain village in Peru – 1912 (1), story 55.

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## 77. Fontamara, a village in Abruzzo, Southern Italy – 1928 (1)

### Priest or donkey?

Early morning at four o'clock Berardo took a glass of wine and set off, with his shovel on his shoulder. Along the way he chewed on a piece of corn bread. His expression was angry. He didn't take the mountain path to the plain, like on other days, when he went working as a farm labourer. He took the mountain path, which was going up.

“Don't waste your words on city people. They only make fun of you”, he growled to himself. “You better let them feel how you think about them.”

For the last forty years there was no priest in Fontamara, the village where Berardo lived. Most of the year the church stood empty. Only a few times a year, the priest of a nearby town came to celebrate a mass, baptize children and to give a religious blessing to a few marriages. Recently the people from Fontamara had composed with great difficulty a petition to ask for a priest and sent it to the bishop. They didn't expect much of it, but you have to try it from time to time, otherwise the bishop would forget you completely.

To their immense surprise the villagers from Fontamara got a letter back, that they would get a priest. They had not counted on it at all. Quickly they cleaned the church thoroughly and repaired the road. They made a beautiful triumphal arch with a lot of greenery and colourful banners. On the day in question they went in procession in the direction of the town to receive the priest in a dignified manner. Alternately they sang religious songs, or recited prayers together.

When the villagers saw in the distance a group of townsmen coming, they went to the side of the road to welcome their new priest. When the crowd came nearer, they were astonished that the townsmen were so rowdy. Suddenly they saw that a donkey walked in front of them, which was driven by strokes with a stick and by stones. The animal was wearing a sort of black cloth and a black hat, as if it was a priest. How the townsmen had to laugh when they saw the surprised and later on indignant faces of the Fontamara villagers. They shook with laughter.

Shocked, the peasants and farm labourers walked back to their village. Berardo was not shocked, but furious. He would let them feel it, those bastards. Every time they ridiculed villagers.

Next morning Berardo set off early, with his shovel on his shoulder. During the day the water supply of the town didn't function properly any longer, and later on it stopped. After investigation, it became clear that all the water pipes from the mountains to the town were broken.

#### Source

The book *Fontamara* (1933) written by the Italian author Ignazio Silone accurately describes village life at the time the Mussolini fascists came to power.

Part 2: Land reform in reverse - Fontamara, a village in Abruzzo, Southern Italy – 1929 (2), story 78.

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## 78. Fontamara, a village in Abruzzo, Southern Italy – 1929 (2)

## Land reform in reverse

The new government was a disaster. It had reduced the wages of farm labourers by forty percent. Every month there was a new tax and the new fascist mayors appropriated whatever they could lay hands on.

For as long as they could remember, the peasants from the village Fontamara had used the water of a certain stream to irrigate their fields to grow corn and vegetables. To their amazement and furious indignation, the mayor of a nearby town had ordered municipal labourers to change the flow of the stream, to the fields he just had bought for a mere song from a large landowner who was in urgent need of money. Policemen with carbines protected the labourers.

Still, there was one positive point: the new government would soon convene a public meeting in the town to organise a redistribution of land from the plain. Previously it had been a big lake, which was drained. A clever big businessman with good connections with the government at that time had been able to appropriate the land, and the poor peasants of Fontamara missed the bus. They could come to work as daily labourers at a paltry wage.

Berardo, a peasant who had lost his small piece of land by unlucky circumstances, became excited when he heard about the public meeting. At long last the government of the Duce would bring justice and give poor, landless farmers a piece of land.

On the day of the meeting a few peasants, who were by chance not at work in the plain, were picked up by a truck in Fontamara. They were brought to the public square of the town and given a place to sit down. Then they were told that they had to cheer for the notables, the governor and the minister.

How disappointed the peasants of Fontamara were, when the minister left in his splendid big car and suddenly the meeting turned out to be over, without any word about the redistribution of the land. “And the land”, Berardo shouted to a few policemen, “what about the land?” All together they went to the town hall, where a big dinner was being held for the notable citizens. When they kept shouting, an official finally came out and explained that the minister had decided to increase the rent for the small farmers and decrease it for the big farmers. In that way the land would gradually end up in the hands of the big farmers, who were in a better position to get big loans and apply new techniques to improve the yield of the land.

The villagers from Fontamara could not believe their ears. In silence they walked back to their village.

### Source

The book *Fontamara* (1933) written by the Italian author Ignazio Silone accurately describes village life at the time the Mussolini fascists came to power.

Part 1: Priest or donkey? - Fontamara, a village in Abruzzo, Southern Italy – 1928 (1) , story 77.

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## 79. A village in Peru – 1930 (1)

## The road

“Indians complete their road”, “300 kilometres in 28 days”, “Right through the mountains”; the headlines of the newspapers in Lima (the capital of Peru) keep on celebrating. The unthinkable has happened: ten thousand Indians have together constructed a broad paved road, in just four weeks. And without any help or even initiative of the government, completely under their own power. So that trucks now can reach interior villages.

How did it happen? Well, simply because the Indians of the village Puquio felt provoked by the Indians from Coracora, who had begun to build a road to the coast. “Do they perhaps think that they can teach us a lesson?” said the Indians from Puquio angrily to each other. “As if we could not do that?” The *varayok's*, the mayors of the Indian neighbourhoods of the village, called a meeting, and decided after long debates that they also would build a road to the coast. The work would begin on the first of July, and would be completed on the 28<sup>th</sup>, just in time for the annual bullfight.

At the request of the *varayok's* the pastor made the plan public in his Quechua sermon the next Sunday. The *mistis*, the rich residents of the village, were immediately enthusiastic, because they understood quite well that they would profit most from the road. They provided crowbars, pickaxes, lamps, rock drills and dynamite. They also gave all a big amount of liquor and coca leaves. And with tears in their eyes they stood on the village place to see them off on the first of July.

In the meantime the *varayok's* had spoken to all villages in the surrounding area to rally as many Indians as possible, so that in the end there were ten thousand of them. The Indians from the coastal area began to work on the road from their side, so that they would meet midway in the mountains.

Early morning on the 28th of July, a truck drives into the village of Puquio. In the back platform of the truck are the *varayok's*. They are silent and serious-looking. When the truck enters the village plaza, where all the *mistis* are waiting to welcome them, one of the *varayok's* addresses them: “The road is ready. We have kept our word. Puquio is the boss. The Indians are the bosses.”

### Source

The marvellous novel *Yawar Fiesta* (Blood Festival, 1941) from the Peruvian writer José María Arguedas depicts the life of Indian peasants and farm labourers. As a child Arguedas lived for several years in an Indian family, and learned there to speak Quechua fluently.

Part 2: Misitu, the holy bull - a mountain village in Peru – around 1930 (2), story 80.

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## 80. A mountain village in Peru – around 1930 (2)

### Misitu, the holy bull

“Quickly, Kokchi, run to warn Misitu.” The K'oñanis look at Kokchi with tears in their eyes, and then he's gone. He walks behind the farm, and then bent through the bushes in the direction of the gorge of the Negromayo. He has a little bag with coca leaves with him, and a *wakawak'ra*, a horn to blow. In the distance don Julián is coming up the pampa, on his fiery white horse, together with a whole group of

overseers, mestizos, all on horseback. But luckily Kokchi is still in time, and arrives at the gorge unseen.

In the past this was all Indian area, with a lot of Indian villages. Till, all of a sudden *mistis*, distinguished white men from Lima (the capital of Peru), arrived, drove off all the Indians, and occupied the land to raise livestock. The K'oñanis are the only Indians who still live here, on the border between the pampas and the mountains. They work on the farms of the *mistis*, they grow there the forage, and herd the animals.

Kokchi is a cowboy on a farm of don Julián. But he is also a *layk'a*, a sorcerer, who can talk with animals. And that's why he has to warn the wild bull Misitu. For the Indians he is a holy animal, living all alone in the forests of the gorge. A gift to them from the *auki*, the holy mountain, Ak'chi. Already for years the K'oñanis warn everyone who passes by here to beware of Misitu, because he is ferocious, and attacks everyone.

When the K'oñanis heard the rumour that don Julián would come to catch Misitu for the yearly bullfight in his town, they were deeply grieved at the thought of losing their holy bull. Their village, the pampas, would be desolate without their Misitu. But Kokchi knew what to do.

When don Julián and his men are sleeping that night, they are awakened by a piercing sound coming from the direction of the gorge. Wauooh, wauooh, wauh, it sounds mournfully. Every time it starts again. In the darkness a few Indians creep toward the overseers, and whisper to them that Misitu is sad for the horses he will kill tomorrow. Perhaps your horse, *taita*, master.

When the group of horsemen departs for the gorge the next morning, the Indian women weep and sing a death song for the men, some of whom certainly will not return alive. "Stop that stupid singing," don Julián growls. But the overseers are already scared. When they arrive in the gorge, get a first glimpse of Misitu, and hear the dismal sound of the *wakawak'ra*, they panic and dig their spurs into their horses' flanks. The white horse of don Julián starts trembling, and then gallops after the other horses.

### Source

The marvellous novel *Yawar Fiesta* (Blood Festival, 1941) from the Peruvian writer José María Arguedas depicts the life of Indian peasants and farm labourers. As a child Arguedas lived for several years in an Indian family, and learned there to speak Quechua fluently.

Part 1: The road - a village in Peru – 1930 (1), story 79.

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## **81. A village in Kenya – about 1930**

### **Discord in the village**

*Njahi*, the rain season, is the most pleasant time of the year. When the rain has fallen, everyone is sure that there will be a good harvest, and is in a good mood. Overnight the fields become green, as if a goddess has waved over it with a magic wand. Everywhere you see flowers, everywhere you hear birds. The children run happily after each other, or climb in the trees.



Njeri, a sturdy, dark woman, is busy with her hoe, while singing and joking with the other women. When she hears a baby crying, she looks up and calls to the older children that they have to take care of the young ones.

A while later, when the women are eating in the shade, one of them says that she has heard that the white people want to build an administrative post somewhere in their region. That they will have to pay taxes, and that possibly controlling white farmers will come who will take away their land. It alarms Njeri, but a moment later she remembers that she has heard this sort of rumour more often the last years. She has a sunny nature, and as soon as everyone is working, she sings along with the others, and makes one joke after another.

In the evening, when Njeri is walking home and has turned off to the long path to her hut on top of the hill, she nevertheless starts to worry. There is discord in the village. There are the villagers around her brother-in-law Joshua, who have converted to Christianity. There is the group of Kabonyi, which want to adhere strictly to the old traditions, and the people who idolize Waiyaki, the modern schoolteacher.

“Although Joshua is my brother-in-law,” she thinks, “and he can preach wonderfully about Jesus who loves all people, why are our own gods Murungu, Mwenenyaga and Ngai not good enough? And the men of Kabonyi with their *Kiama*, their secret society, who want to keep the tribe unspoiled, as they say. Why do they have to threaten Christians? After all, they are still our sisters and brothers.”

“At least Waiyaki is there,” Njeri thinks, “our young teacher. I love him most of all. He learned a lot from the white people, the missionaries in the city. But he has come back, and has opened a school, so that our children can learn what the white people know and do. But, he remains true to his people. He hasn't become an errand-boy of the whites.”

In this way, Njeri is reasoning to herself. Then, she sees a few boys walking up with the goats and cows of their families. They are heading home, they urge the animals along, meanwhile having fun by running after each other, with their herder sticks raised, 'threatening'. Njeri laughs, and forgets – temporarily – her worries about the discord in the village.

### Source

The short novel *The river between* (1965) from the Kenyan author Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o describes the tensions in a remote area, when the whites are pushing closer.

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## **82. A hamlet in the Zhejiang Province, China – about 1930**

### **The mother**

“Thank Heaven!” the old mother shouts when she sees her newborn grandchild, a healthy boy. She has waited so long and has despaired so often, but finally Heaven is favourable to her.

Then she sits down at the doorstep in the sun to warm her old bones. How old and weak she has become! How strong she once was. She used to work like a horse on her field. She had no choice because her man had gone away. Oh, he was such a handsome, cheerful man. Often he was singing and making people laugh. He was skilled with dice. But didn't like working on the land. One day he has left for the city and never sent news.

Her eldest son, while still a child, felt the man at home and assisted in the field. He sweated and toiled, so they could manage to carry on. Once her loneliness had been too much for her and she gave herself to the land-agent who had an eye to her. But after she became pregnant, he would have nothing to do with her.

With difficulty she succeeded in hiding her pregnancy from the villagers. She took only her neighbour into her confidence. This woman bought strong herbs and with these, they disposed of the baby. She suffered hell, and afterwards she lost the strong, lively woman she once used to be. However she was spared the jokes in the village, the shame of an illegitimate child.

So much she has lost in her life. Her beloved daughter, for example. She became blind, as so many children in the village. It was difficult to find her a husband of a decent family. So she got a man from a poor, harsh peasant family in the mountains with only a small piece of infertile land. Her girl died after only a few months of marriage from a severe cold. Or had the family abused her, driven her to desperation?

Her youngest son. Of him she doesn't want to think at all any more. But she can't help it. The tears well up in her eyes. He was the apple of her eye. He resembled her husband just as cheerful, just as handsome. Her eldest son could not stand him because he withdrew from working in the field. But she loved him. He left for the city, but regularly he came back for a few days.

What he did in the city, she doesn't know exactly. Something with books although he never learned to read. When he came to the village, he went to the tea-house in the evening and spoke loudly and passionately about the injustice in the world. So many poor and so few rich. But that the great day will come that the land will be of everyone. Then, there will no longer be exploitation, poverty, or lazy big landowners in the city and land-agents who fleece you.

Not so long ago, he was locked up in jail in the city, with many of his friends. 'Communists' they are, it was said. But the old mother doesn't know what it means. They are the 'new robbers'. But her son has never stolen anything in his whole life! They want to 'steal the land', they said. But how can you steal land? Is it like a mat? Can you roll up and take it under your arm!

Again she has to weep when she remembers how he and his friends – there were also some girls with them, wild girls – marched to the scaffold. They were all handcuffed to each other with rope, and soldiers with guns watched them. While walking, they were singing loudly. For the last time she saw her beloved son.

How much she has lost in her life. But now she has a grandson. At last. She smiles. The family will continue to live, even when she is no longer there. The land will be ploughed and bear fruit, each year over.

#### Source

In *The Mother* (1931) the American author Pearl Buck describes the life of Chinese peasants. She focuses especially on women. She doesn't mention the names of the mother or the village like the story is about all Chinese peasant women from all small villages.

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### 83. Uttar Pradesh, India – 1930s (1)

#### Finally a cow!

Hori smiles. Finally, his dream will come true. And that of his wife Dhania. They will get a cow! How firm and strong their son Gobar will become when he can drink a cup of milk every day. How healthy and nice their daughters Rupa and Sona will grow up when they will drink milk day in day out.

Dhania had her doubts when Hori came home with the good news. “Will there be enough grass and rice straw?” she asked. “A cow has to eat well daily. That should not be at the expense of the two bullocks.” But Hori explained her that it was impossible for him to let the opportunity slip away. Dhola, a farmer from a nearby village with a small herd, was in trouble. He had too little food for all his animals. He wanted to sell one for eighty rupees. A beautiful, young animal she is. After calving, she will give a lot of milk. And she is so meek that even a child can milk her.

But where could Hori find eighty rupees? They were already so deep in debt, and the interest is so high. Within a few years of a loan, they would have to repay double the sum and just a few years later, double the sum of that. But this time he has a wild card. Dhola lost his wife last year. He cannot bear the loneliness. He is desperately needs a new wife. It is not easy to find one when you are already a bit older.

Hori knows a woman in another village, a distant relative, who he can certainly persuade. He will arrange their marriage. When he told Dhola about it, he delighted promised him the young cow, “And *bhai*, brother, you can repay me when you have money available. There is no hurry. Soon we will be family.”

Shortly the cow will come. How their prestige in the village will rise. He will her tie up in front of their house. “Look,” the neighbours will say to each other, “Hori is doing quite well. He has a cow. And what a kind and beautiful one she is. She must have cost him quite a lot.”

#### Source

In *Godaan, The Gift of the Cow* (1936) the Indian author Munshi Premchand tells the ups and downs of a peasant family, how they struggle to survive and save the family's honour

Part 2: The cow did bring along nothing but problems - Uttar Pradesh, India – 1930s (2), story 84.

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### 84. Uttar Pradesh, India – 1930s (2)

#### The cow did bring along nothing but problems

Dhania could hit her head against the wall. It seemed so splendid to finally have a cow. But ever since they got the cow, life became increasingly difficult.

A few days after the arrival of the animal, when Hori came home from the field late in the evening, he saw his youngest brother, Heera, sitting near the cow. “I just dropped in to have a look at your animal.” In less than two hours the cow collapsed with big glassy eyes and died a short while later. Heera had poisoned her. Dhania was furious. Hori was at odds with his brothers after the division of the

farm of their parents. But killing a cow, what Hindu would dare to take this on his conscience?

The next day, the police came to investigate. Heera was nowhere to be seen. The police decided to search the Heera's house. Hori found that terrible. The shame it would bring on his family. Their good name would be dragged through the mud, and how difficult it would be then to find a good bride for their son and bridegrooms for their two daughters! And to get help when they really needed it. At the village festivals people would whisper about them.

Hastily, Hori arranged a loan with the moneylender to bribe the police officer and prevent the house search.

There arose also big problems with Dhola. When their son Gobar went to pick up the cow at Dhola's farm, he started talking with Jhunia, the youngest daughter, a smooth young woman. She had roped him in.

Jhunia became pregnant. In outrage, Dhola drove her out the house. The two brothers of Jhunia swore to kill Gobar, who fled to the city, to Lucknow.

That happened already more than a year ago. How would he be doing? They heard no word or sign from him. He was supposed to take over the farm. They were supposed to have a quiet old age, and Gobar would become the head of the family.

Tears well into the eyes of Dhania. It seemed to be so nice, but the cow did nothing but cause problems.

#### Source

In *Godaan, The Gift of the Cow* (1936) the Indian author Munshi Premchand tells the ups and downs of a peasant family, how they struggle to survive and save the family's honour

Part 1: Finally a cow! - Uttar Pradesh, India – 1930s (1), story 83.

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### **85. California, United States – 1930s**

## **Dreaming of a small farm of your own**

Lennie looks at George with pleading eyes: 'Please George, tell me again.'

– 'I did tell you yesterday, Lennie.'

– 'Please!'

– 'Okay. When we have saved enough money, we will buy our own small farm with a few acres of land. Not too much land. So we only have to work six, seven hours a day, and we don't have to toil eleven hours any longer. We will grow our own grain. We will have a kitchen garden with all the vegetables we like. We will have also a few fruit trees, with peaches, apples and cherries. We will keep a cow, a pig, and some chickens.'

– 'And rabbits,' Lennie interrupts him. 'I will take care of them. I will never forget to feed them.'

– 'Yes, also rabbits,' George confirms. 'We will have a small alfalfa field. You will go there with a bag, cut alfalfa, and bring it to the rabbits.'

– 'We will also have a stove, won't we?'

– 'Yes, a small round stove to burn wood or coal. When it rains, we will sit near the nice, warm

stove.'

George Milton and Lennie Klein are two wandering farm labourers. Lennie is simple-minded but as strong as an ox. He can work for three. George has taken pity on him. Together, they wander from farm to farm. Here, they work a week; there, a month. Then, they go further: ploughing, sowing, reaping, threshing. But never for themselves. Always for others.

The work is hard. And the money they earn vanishes fast when George goes on a spree from time to time.

George knows an old couple with a small farm who wants to sell it for not too much money. He has firmly determined to save all their money from now on.

'You know, Lennie, these other farm workers are all by themselves. They are all alone. They go from one farm to another and get drunk because they have nobody. We have each other. We are a pair. If we start saving money now, soon we will have our own small farm. When there is a fair in the village, we will milk our cow, feed our chickens, and go there. We won't give a damn. We won't have to ask permission to anyone. We will just go.'

#### Source

In the short story *Of Mice and Men* (1937) the American author John Steinbeck sketches the hard life of wandering farm workers. Everyone dreams of a small farm of his own.

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### **86. Gaomi District, Shandong Province, China – 1934**

#### **Crab hunt**

Douguan almost cannot control himself, and is on the point of jumping up. Uncle Arhat pulls the eight-year-old boy down and says: "When you have no patience, you will not get warm rice pudding." Breathing heavily through his nose, Douguan sits down again. It is a beautiful autumn night, the dark heaven is studded with stars, bigger ones and smaller ones, some twinkling, others beaming. Silently the water of the river splashes against its bank. A few feet away from them sits a kerosene lamp with four panes of green glass, which casts a vague circle of light on the ground.

Douguan has already waited several hours with Uncle Arhat. When it became dark, the river crabs came crawling out of the water to look for food among the plants. First they came one by one, then by dozens. Slowly but steadily they go to the lamp, till there are hundreds, many hundreds sitting near the lamp. "Now!", Uncle Arhat hisses. Douguan jumps up like a compressed spring, which is released. He catches two corners of the net where the crabs are sitting, and pulls them up, while Uncle Arhat pulls the other two corners. They bring the four corners together, tie them quickly with a big knot, and throw the tied net aside. Immediately Douguan jumps to the second net, and pulls also from this one two corners up.

They have caught hundreds and hundreds of crabs. Douguan is quite proud of it. They enjoy eating as many crabs as they want, and still more and more crabs – until it nauseates them. Uncle Arhat scrapes out the other crabs with a knife, grinds the meat, throws it in a vessel, adds salt, and stirs the whole to

make a tasty paste. For months they eat crab paste, until the paste starts to stink. Then Douguan's mother throws it on the poppies. You get the most beautiful poppy flowers and balls thanks to this crab manure, and later on first-rate opium, which Douguan's mother enjoys.

Later on in his life Douguan remembers from time to time that beautiful autumn night by the bank of the river, together with Uncle Arhat, the greenish shine of the lamp and the thousands of restless shoving jointed legs and claws.

### Source

The book *Red Sorghum* (1986) from the Chinese writer Mo Yan tells the story of the bitter fight against the Japanese occupiers in a remote peasant region. The struggle between the Kuomintang, the communists and the local gangs of bandits is no less violent.

Part 2: The fox ghost - Gaomi District, Shandong Province, China – 1937 (2), story 93.

Part 3: 'Take me back' - Gaomi District, Shandong Province, China – 1985 (3), story 137.

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## **87. A hamlet in New South Wales, Australia – about 1935 (2)**

### **Failure**

“Say something,” Amy had shouted when he came home. But he isn't a big talker, she knows that. And what to say when you have failed so badly? Stan Parker, an old farmer with a browned face, and already quite a lot of wrinkles on his neck, leans against the side of the cow which he is milking. By hand. Stan doesn't want a milking machine. That's not good for the teats. And they don't have so many cows, they milk them easily, just the two of them. The young farmers laugh about it. Let them laugh.

When Stan carefully pours his bucket of milk through the strainer on top of the milk can, he looks at Amy. She wipes some tears from her right cheek, and sniffs. Then she goes on milking without looking at Stan. She used to be slender when he married her; now she has grown old, just like him, and sturdy, or rather, fat. Their two children, Ray and Thelma, had left home years ago. They are on their own here. But they are doing pretty well, together.

When he came home, he immediately had seen that Amy knew it already. Someone must have told her about it. She looked so grey, as she never has looked before. Defeated. When he had got the newspaper out of the mailbox this morning, he had read it in a small article on the front page. In Sydney a certain man Ray Parker had been killed in a pub. Quickly he had pulled on his good clothes, and got into his old Ford. “I have to go to town for business,” he had called to his wife.

In a daze he had driven around the city, till he arrived at the house where Ray lived. An unkempt woman with dark circles under her eyes from crying, opened the door. Ray was dead, what could be said about it? A stupid pub fight. A drunk friend had walked in with a pistol. “You sold me out,” he had shouted, and then shot him in his belly and his chest.

The newspaper had said that Ray Parker had been in prison several times for theft and robbing, and that he lived with a prostitute. That is their son. He had roamed here and there, and had had several jobs. He had left his wife and child for that other woman. Amy and he never had good contact with him, since he

had gotten older. And also not with Thelma, their daughter. She had done well in school, became a secretary at a notary's office, and later married one of the notaries. They have lost her too. She has become so genteel. After some time they will get rid of the cows, and sell most of the land for urban development.

Stan empties the next bucket in the milk churn. He looks at Amy. She is a good woman. But, what can you say when you have failed in bringing up your children?

#### Source

In the novel *The tree of man* (1956) the Australian author Patrick White describes in an almost poetic way the lives and feelings of a farmer and his wife on a small farm.

Part 1: Forest Fire - a hamlet in New South Wales, Australia – 1914 (1), story 57.

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### **88. Mountain region in the north of Sweden – 1930s**

#### **'Our reindeer are your reindeer'**

“Will she ever come back?” Njenna asks herself worriedly. She is sitting on the ground by her reindeer, which are grazing quietly around her. Njenna is a young Sami (Lapp), a nomad. “Why has she left us? It is so beautiful here with our mountains, the cold water, the endless sky. Here we have our herd, our family, our own tents with all we need. We have our stories and our *yoiks*, our traditional songs. We can express all our feelings in our *yoiks*.” Then, Njenna starts singing about the departure of her older sister Elle-Marja.

For a few years Njenna has gone to a Lapp school, together with Elle-Marja. They hated to be there. The boys of the village where the school was located called them 'dirty Lapps'. At school the teacher slapped you when you spoke Sami; you had to speak Swedish. The children lived together at the boarding school, and they all missed their families enormously.

Elle-Marja was a bright student. She was the best one in the whole group. Once, when some visitors came from Uppsala, she was allowed to speak to the guests, of course in Swedish. She was ashamed to be a Sami, and wanted to become a teacher. She had to go to Uppsala and study, by whatever means. One day she walked away from the school, and boarded a train.

“Elle-Marja, my beloved sister, when will you return to us?” Njenna sings. “How can you live in Uppsala, without the reindeer, without family? Don't marry a Swede, then you will be lost to us forever. Stay with us, come back. Our tent is your tent, our reindeer are your reindeer.”

#### Source

The movie *Sami Blood* (2016) made by the Swedish director Amanda Kernell, who is a Sami herself, tells the story of a nomad girl, who flees from her people, her land, and her culture.

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### **89. A village in Abruzzo, Southern Italy – 1935**

## Sciatàp

For almost four years Francesco Zompa had lived and worked in New York. He slept on a piece of cardboard under the stairs in the house of his boss Carlo Campanella, who came from the south of Italy just like him.

Campanella sold ice cream in the summer and coal in the winter. He had Anglicized his name, and so his shop was named 'Charles Littlebell, Ice & Coal'. Francesco had toiled from early morning till late in the evening. When he asked his boss anything, he always shouted, "Shut up!"

When Francesco returned to his village, Pietrasecca, at the least little thing he shouted, "Sciatàp" (Shut up) to his wife and children. Therefore this soon became his nickname in the village. After a few years his original name was forgotten about.

In the meantime Mussolini had come to power. Every week a wall poster, 'Le Notizie di Roma', arrived in the village, which the school-teacher had to glue on the church door. She also went with the fresh poster to the *locando*, the village pub, to read out the main article, and to explain what was meant. The peasants, tipsy from the wine, raised awkward questions. When it was written that "foreign countries would like to pay a lot to have such a splendid leader as their own *Duce*", then Sciatàp asked for example: "How much do they want to pay?", "How much is bid?" and "Who bids more?" When the teacher then explained that this was "so to speak", Sciatàp reacted with a scornful: "So, it is not true."

When the poster spoke of a "revolution of agrarians" another peasant asked, "What are these 'agrarians'?", then the teacher clarified patiently, "That is you, *cafoni* (farm labourers)". Immediately several peasants shouted rowdily, "We didn't notice anything of that 'revolution' here", and, "We only get less for our grain and wine."

When the teacher, a bit disheartened, advised the peasants "to think it over again" so that next week "they would understand it better", it went down the wrong way with Sciatàp: "Stop that stupid talk, I have been in America."

### Source

The book *Bread and Wine* (1937), by the Italian writer Ignazio Silone, is about a young man from the city who in a hamlet tries to urge the peasants to resist the fascist regime. Silone himself grew up in a small peasant village.

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## 90. Oklahoma, United States – around 1935 (1)

### Driven away by the bulldozers

Tom Joad is drowsy, sitting on the front bench of the old car, converted into a truck. The sun goes down and is shining on his face. Two days Tom and his whole family are driving on U.S. Route 66 to the West, to California.

It was difficult to say goodbye to their land in Oklahoma. The great-great-grandfather Joad got a plot of land from the government and fought the Indians to get them away. That is not okay, but that is how it



went these days.

There have been good years, but that feels like a distant dream. It has been much too dry in the last years. There were dust-storms, and the harvests failed over and over again. Like everyone else, they have taken out a loan, and later again. In that way, the land ended up in the hands of the bank, and they instead had become tenants.

Two years ago, the bank decided on a new approach. All tenants had to leave. A few mega farms were coming. Big bulldozers with huge ploughs, harrows and sowing-machines behind them drew dead straight lines over the land for miles. You just got a last warning and then 'by accident' a bulldozer hit your farm, which collapsed in half.

They went to stay with Uncle John ten miles away. Two years all of them lived together in the small farm. But Uncle John had to leave too. They saved money by picking cotton and bought an old car from it. They sawed away the back, built high sides made of boards, and loaded all their stuff on it.

Now they are on their way to California, the country of sun, oranges, grapes and peaches. A few months ago Tom got a pamphlet in his hands with: "Wanted: 800 pickers – good earnings." They are ready to turn their hand to anything they can get. They will save money, buy a piece of land, and build a small white house on it, like you find at calendar pictures. And plant orange trees ...

In this manner, thousands, tens of thousands, many, many tens of thousands of poor peasants went to the West.

#### Source

In *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), the American author John Steinbeck describes the fate of peasants in the south-central US, who lost their land and went west. It is an impressive novel which sheds light upon many sides of peasant poverty. A tribute to the perseverance of peasant families.

Part 2: Nightmare - California, United States – around 1935 (2), story 91.

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### **91. California, United States – around 1935 (2)**

#### **Nightmare**

"Now we leave", Mother Joad decides. For days the rain has come down in buckets. They stay in a railway-car, converted into a sort of home. Slowly, the water is creeping in. In great haste the men built a platform where they have already been sitting for two days. There is no food any more, and no wood to fill up the stove. The children are in a daze from sitting still. Father is only dreaming of their farm in Oklahoma.

Together they wade through the waist-high water, setting off for a higher spot. Fortunately, they find a barn on a hill, with hay in it.

Is this the California they have dreamed of, Father wonders. Sometimes they found some work, but the

wages were frightfully low. Just enough to eat from and to save a bit for petrol when you have to move on.

A friendly small farmer explained to them why the picking wages are so paltry. The banks are bossing the farmers' organizations. They have determined an absurdly low price for the fruit. In this way, the small farmers are cornered, and in the end they have to sell their orchards.

The big landowners don't bother because they have canneries. And the price of a can of fruit remains the same. They can cheaply buy fruit from the small farmers who don't have a cannery. Then, they make a good profit and buy up the small orchards with loans from the bank.

Luckily, it is dry in the barn. Mother looks around, sees an old cloth, helps the children take off their clothes, and rubs them dry and warm. They find an old and a young man in the barn too. They will make the best of it. Together.

### Source

In *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), the American author John Steinbeck describes the fate of peasants in the south-central US, who lost their land and went west. It is an impressive novel which sheds light upon many sides of peasant poverty. A tribute to the perseverance of peasant families.

Part 1: Driven away by the bulldozers - Oklahoma, United States – around 1935 (1), story 90.

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## **92. A village in Maharashtra, India – 1937 – film**

### **Happy years**

It is harvest time, and it is sunny; Radha, a peasant woman about forty years old, feels happy. She is sitting on the ox-cart, on top of the *jowar*, the local grain; she has put one arm around the neck of her youngest son Birju, and the other around the neck of her oldest, Ramu. It is a good harvest. Like always the awful moneylender will confiscate three-quarters of the harvest, but from the remainder they will manage to survive this year.

Radha has had setbacks in her life. She was happily married with a nice, sturdy, cheerful husband. But her mother-in-law had borrowed 500 rupees from the village moneylender for the wedding party. It had been a splendid party, which the villagers talked about for a long time. But the debt hung like a millstone around their necks.

In the poor years Radha and her family had been very hungry. She has lost two of her children. To survive, her husband and she cleared a piece of fallow land. That was hard work, because the land was full of rocks. While removing a big rock, her husband was crushed, and lost both his arms. He couldn't bear to be dependant, and one night he disappeared. She has never seen him again.

Smiling, Radha looks at her two sons. How hard they work. Soon it will become time to look for brides for them. The moneylender has taken everything away from her, when from time to time she went to him to borrow some extra money to buy food, when the children were too hungry. And once her house was destroyed by a flood. But look now, ever since both her sons have grown up, she has slowly but

surely recovered. Now she has a new house, a plough, two beautiful white bullocks, and enough to eat. The only thing lacking is her husband. Daily she prays that he at long last will return, like she has seen in a dream. She still misses him every day.

#### Source

*Mother India* (1957) is an impressive movie from the Indian director Mehboob Khan about village life: the hard work on the land, the crop failures and the exploitation, but also the good years, the happiness and the solidarity.

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### **93. Gaomi District, Shandong Province, China – 1937**

#### **The fox ghost**

Old Geng had gotten up early, when the cocks of the village just had crowed. The sun had not yet risen, but the sky was already colouring a lovely orange-red. It was frosty cold outside, a small white cloud left his mouth every time he exhaled. Old Geng was without doubt the best hunter of the village. He knew exactly which trail the fox would take. He lay down behind a low river bank and waited. Old Geng was getting cold, but he waited patiently. After some time, he smelled the fox's scent and heard a soft crackle of a piece of ice.

Old Geng waited another moment, and then he drew himself up carefully, and saw the fox on the ice of the river bank. The fox looked at him. He was not afraid. He knew that Old Geng was lying there, but he had no fear, just like he trusted Old Geng. He had beautiful red fur. Old Geng would get a decent amount of money for it. He levelled his rifle, blew his right forefinger warm with his breath, and pulled the trigger. Once more, the fox looked at him with furious eyes, just like he cursed him, and then he tumbled down.

At the same moment he heard shouting in a foreign language. Within a few seconds a group of Japanese stood around him. They stabbed him with their bayonets one after another. Blood dripped out his body. Old Geng knew that his time had come. He was such an experienced hunter, but he hadn't heard the Japs coming, stupid as he was.

Old Geng felt hot, like he was burning. He tore his quilted cotton coat. He was so hot, and slowly he lost consciousness. As if in a dream he felt a soft, cool tongue going over his body. Old Geng opened his eyes, and saw the fox sitting next to him. He didn't look angry any more, but sad, full of compassion. The fox, or actually the ghost of the fox, licked his wounds. Some medication must have been on the tongue of the fox, because his wounds closed, the bleeding stopped, and Old Geng slowly regained consciousness. He got up with great difficulty, and staggered home. He crawled under a few furs at his *kang*, his stove bed, and slept for three days. Then he was healed.

Since then he was called Eighteen Stabs Geng. You could see the scars on his chest and back. The ghost of the fox had saved him. Eighteen Stabs Geng made a small altar and brought daily some offerings to the ghost of the fox, until the day of his death many, many years later.

#### Source

The book *Red Sorghum* (1986) from the Chinese writer Mo Yan tells the story of the bitter fight against

the Japanese occupiers in a remote peasant region. The struggle between the Kuomintang, the communists and the local gangs of bandits is no less violent.

Part 1: Crab hunt - Gaomi District, Shandong Province, China – 1934 (1), story 86.

Part 3: 'Take me back' - Gaomi District, Shandong Province, China – 1985 (3), story 137.

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#### **94. A village in Aragon, Spain – 1937**

### **The village priest no longer understands**

I don't understand that boy. I mean, for a long time he has ceased to be a boy, but I do vividly remember how I baptised him. As a child he often came to chat with me. So friendly! For a moment, pastor Mosén Milán smiles. Then, he continues with his prayers. But soon his mind wanders again. Later on the boy became an altar boy. Perhaps it all started there. Once I took him with me to give extreme unction to a dying man. It was a farm labourer who lived in a cave. Paco was completely appalled by the poverty. I soothed him by saying that the man would go directly to heaven, because God loves the poor. And that he would be happy there forever.

Two years ago I consecrated his marriage. It was a great party. We ate delicious stuffed partridge. Everyone was joyful, everyone loves Paco. He really is a good-hearted boy. He is from a small farmer's family, but he doesn't look down on upon farm labourers. Quite the opposite. He often talked with me about the caves. That they should be abolished, and that the poor should get houses from the municipality. Sometimes his fantasy was running wild.

And suddenly the whole country was in turmoil. The king fled the country. There was a new government in Madrid. In the municipal elections only small farmers were elected. Paco was one of them. We heard that a new law was passed, that the aristocracy had to give up their land to the villages. "The pasture land which we have to rent every year from that duke who lives far away, is now ours, it belongs to the village," Paco said. I explained him that it had been like that for four hundred years, and that you surely could not abolish the land tenure system easily. But he didn't listen to me.

Pastor Milán sighs deeply. He still sits on his prayer chair, and holds his head in his hands. Rumour has it that groups of men from the city with clubs and guns come to the villages to 'purge' them, as they call it. That they beat peasants to death who sympathise with the new government. I hope that nothing bad will happen to Paco, he is such a kind boy – well, actually, a man.

#### Source

*Requiem for a Spanish Peasant* (1953) is a beautiful and terrible short novel from the Spanish writer Ramon J. Sender, about life in a small village in times of change.

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#### **95. North-east Brazil – 1938 – film**

### **Father Sebastião**

“I can see a lush green land, the horses are eating flowers, and the children are drinking out of rivers filled with milk.” Father Sebastião can preach marvellously. Old men and women with weathered faces look up to him with big, amazed, and joyful eyes. There are also young people and small children, all poor peasants.

Manuel is one of the followers of Sebastião. He had a small shack with a little kitchen garden and was a cow herder. He kept watch over twelve cows of don Moraes, a rich farmer, and a few of his own. In a blind rage, Manuel has killed don Moraes, when he wanted to blame him for the death of two of Moraes' cows, who had been bitten by snakes. Don Moraes bullied him, shouted that he had the law at his side, and lashed him with his whip, when he answered back in a way Don Moraes didn't like. Thereupon, Manuel pulled out his machete. Since then, he is on the run, together with his wife Rosa.

Luckily, Manuel and Rosa came upon the group headed by father Sebastião. The group lives on Monte Santo, the holy mountain, and travels from time to time singing and praying through the land, like in a procession. When their needs are great and the believers happen upon isolated houses of the rich, they invade it, kill the occupants, and take anything they can use.

One day when it is storming, father Sebastião shouts that tomorrow will be the big day, that it will rain golden coins, and that all pure souls will be taken to the new Holy Land. Manuel has also taken up prophesying about a wonderful island in the midst of the sea, where they will all go together, when God will set the old world on fire. Rosa doesn't trust it. “Manuel, this is a dream, it is not true, wake up. Let us leave. Soon the soldiers will come.” Manuel shouts at Rosa that she is possessed by the devil, and that all unbelievers will die.

Alas, Rosa's foreboding turns out to be too true. Next morning, a squad of soldiers attacks the worshippers and kills most of them. Those who are able to escape, join one of the various *cangaços*, roaming gangs of peasant bandits.

#### Source

In his impressive movie *Black God, white devil* (1964) the Brazilian director Glauber Rocha brings the *cangaços* from the folk tales to life.

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## **96. Village south of Nanjing, China – 1938**

### **Underground resistance**

Lao Er is delighted. How awesome is that secret room underground which his elderly father and mother had dug! The entrance is behind the cooking place in the dark kitchen of the small farm, hidden under a big board with clay and straw on it.

Last year, war reached their district. Firstly, the Japanese soldiers raged in a beastly manner against the city dwellers. Then, they came down through the countryside, looting, raising fire, murdering, and raping. Lao Er succeeded in hiding in the reeds with his wife Jade. Shortly thereafter, they went to the free Chinese hinterland, 2000 miles to the west. Jade was pregnant and wanted to give birth in a safe

place.

Months later, Lao Er received a letter from Ling Tan and Ling Sao, his father and mother. They urgently ask him to return. They were all alone now on the farm. His two brothers who helped on the farm had gone to the mountains to join the guerrillas. The parents were resolute in their decision to stay on the farm. They are attached to the earth. They feel obliged to take care of the land even in these difficult times. This earth has fed their family already for so many generations, through good times and bad times ...

Jade did not want to go back to the area where the enemy was ruling. “Here we are helping to build up a huge army to defeat the enemy later on. What can we do there, before the eyes of those devils?” she screamed. Afterwards, she understood that Lao Er can not ignore the call of his parents. Together with their baby they returned.

The last part of their journey home was the most dangerous. They were no longer in the hills any areas where the Japanese wouldn't dare to go. Jade cut her hair short and made her face dark with mud. In her dirty blue cotton jacket and trousers, along with her feet in big sandals of plaited rice straw, she looked just like a man, a peasant. She carried a basket on her back and under it, her child. And thus, they walked to the farm in the night.

How happy Jade was afterwards that they had gone together. Her parents-in-law had dug a small secret room, where she and Lao Er could hide with their baby. They will deepen the underground room. They will make it a sleeping place for guerrillas from the hills and a storing place for weapons and food they want to hide for the enemies – to hand over as little as possible to them. Together with a few other villagers they will perform small attacks in the countryside and perhaps even in the big city ... There is so much to do.

#### Source

In *Dragon Seed – the story of China at war* (1941) – the American author Pearl Buck describes the life of Chinese peasants at the time of the Japanese occupation: the terror, the harsh laws, the anger, the solidarity, the resistance, and the collaboration. Meanwhile the farm work goes on because the land keeps drawing their attention.

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### **97. A hacienda in Peru – 1938**

#### **The Indian peasant leader**

It is a moonless night. Stealthily, two dark figures creep by a row of dwellings. The first one softly knocks on a rough wooden door. When it cracks open a bit, he whispers their names. In the small living room hangs an oil lamp on the wall; in front of the window hangs a canvas cloth. About ten men sit in a circle on the ground. Calmly the visitors sit down by them, nodding to left and right. “Are we all here?” the man who opened the door asks in a muffled voice, then continues, “*Compañeros*, friends, let's begin. Tonight we will talk about establishing a union on our hacienda. I am happy that Saturnino Huillca has come to us.” He looks deliberately at the man who has arrived last.

Then Huillca, a slender Indian peasant around 45 years old with a friendly but resolute face, starts speaking, “*Compañeros*, also for you it is high time to establish a union. So many peasants have done this already on so many haciendas. For many long years, what am I saying, for generations, landowners have exploited us. Because we have a scrap of land on loan, day in, day out, we have to toil for them, for nothing, without getting even one *centavo* for it. But now new laws have been adopted in Lima, the capital of our country. Letting people work for you for nothing is now prohibited by law. All peasants are entitled to establish a union, to stand up for their rights, as described in the law.”

A lengthy conversation follows, because the poor peasants don't concede easily. Huillca gets many questions: “Wasn't he himself imprisoned for months?”, “Hasn't he been removed from his land?”, “Aren't his wife and children ill-treated?”, and “Who will help us, when we have to appear at court?” Huillca answers every question calmly and carefully. “*Compañeros*,” he concludes, “my heart aches, when I see how much you suffer. It is entirely true, that it is an uphill battle to get our rights. But we have to fight, we don't have to let them treat us like animals any longer, but like the hard-working people we are.”

Then, Huillca says good-bye, the door opens, and he slips away in the dark, again together with his younger guide. In Lima good laws are adopted, but here in the far-away countryside a union leader has to come and go like a thief in the night.

#### Source

*Huillca: habla un campesino peruano* (Huillca: a Peruvian peasant speaks, 1975 – no English translation) from the Peruvian journalist Hugo Neira Samanez is one long and compelling interview with an inspired Indian peasant leader. It reads like a novel.

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### **98. A hamlet in Northern Italy – 1941**

#### **The beast**

Slowly the door of the room opens. With a pale face the young doctor comes into the kitchen. All eyes are on him. He has been busy for one and a half hours. “You can say goodbye to her,” he says quietly. “There is nothing more I can do.” Then, his faces sets. “He will get thirty years for it. And that's what he deserves.” With difficulty he restrains a curse. When a short time later the women lament loudly by the dying young woman, and the men stand with bowed heads, their hands clasped in front of their bellies, the doctor drives away in his leather coat on his noisy motorcycle.

Gisella was not yet twenty years old, Ernesto considers, while walking back to his farm late that night. Such an attractive, such a brave young woman. They would have married after a while, once he had good agreements on the land between his and her father.

How often he hadn't told Gisella to be a bit more careful with Talino, because he is unpredictable. Talino is a beast, she had answered him. He set Rico's farm on fire. With my own eyes I saw him run away across the field, to hide. Then he had answered, everyone in the village knows that. But watch out for Talino. Whereupon Gisella burst into tears, and said that Rico had done nothing, and that everyone

let Talino carry on. How he had abused her, and everyone looked the other way, and now that fire.

When they were unloading the fresh hay, and Talino had bragged about being a real man, Gisella had shouted at him, “You are a coward, and nothing more.” Then, Talino became enraged, and before anyone could act, he thrust his pitchfork into Gisella’s throat. While everyone was tending to Gisella, Talino fled. Ernesto, who was also helping with haying, ran after him in vain.

Gisella was right, Ernesto thinks, striding along sombrely. We all allowed him to carry on. And now, it is too late.

Above the dark hills floats a pale crescent moon, and tirelessly the crickets are chirping.

### Source

The Italian author Cesare Pavese sketches the peasants' life in his fine short novel *Your Villages* (1941).

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## **99. Pernambuco, North-east Brazil – 1942**

### **On the run**

It is hot, very hot, and dry. Even the river has dried up. It is almost a desert here; everywhere you see cacti and thorn bushes. The road is bumpy, dusty and full of loose stones. Johann is driving his truck. On the sides it is painted: 'Aspirinas: O Fim de Todos os Males' ('Aspirins will remove all your ailments'). In every village he stops and builds a tent, and in the evening he shows a movie about Rio de Janeiro: huge blocks of apartment buildings, luxury cars, and Carnival. Next, advertisements for aspirin. The newest cure-all against cold, flu, headache, hangover, love-sickness, and whatever causes you pain. After the screening he sells many tins of aspirin. The next morning he continues travelling

On the road, he picks up poor peasants who ask for a ride: a man with a big rifle, who gets out quickly because he sees an animal that he likes to shoot; an older woman with a chicken; a beautiful but sad young woman; and a gruff young man.

- 'What do you sell?' asks the young man.
- 'Medicines, aspirin, it helps with all sorts of diseases.'
- 'Really? When it helps against hunger, you will become rich here.'

The man is called Ranulpho. When he opens his mouth, a negative remark falls out of it.

- 'Are you always like that?' asks Johann.
- 'What do you mean?'
- 'So bitter.'
- 'You know, I come from such a hole: five houses and a big cross in the middle. Nobody on the streets. Nothing is happening there. Nothing at all.'
- 'Well.'
- 'One day, I knew what to do: today I leave! And I left, going to Rio de Janeiro, or something.'
- 'When you don't find a job or a place to stay?'
- 'I will manage. No matter what, I will not go back. They laugh at you, when you come back. The bloody bastards. And you?'



- 'Me?'
- 'Yes. Where are you coming from?'
- 'From Germany, Europe. It is war there. I don't want to become a soldier, I don't want to die. At least there is no war here, you don't get bombs dropped on your head.'
- 'No, there is nothing at all here, not even war.'

Ranulpho and Johann, two young men on the run.

### Source

The movie *Cinema, Aspirinas e Urubus* (2005) of the Brazilian film-maker Marcelo Gomes calmly shows the arid, red-hot rural areas of North-east Brazil.

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## **100. A village in Senegal – 1942 – film**

### **The nightmare of Efock**

In the village Efock people don't sleep well. They suffer from nightmares. Over and over they scream in their sleep. Over and over they see how the white man with the pith helmet gestures downward with his hand and orders, "Fire!" Over and over they see the men fall down.

Last year the village Efock received word that they had to surrender their entire rice harvest to the French. Everything. Everyone was outraged. The women hid the rice. The village elders met together, and offered a sacrifice to the village god Emitai. Then a group of African soldiers under the command of a white, French officer surrounds the village. The men of the village attack the soldiers with spears and bows, but they are not able to deal with them, because the soldiers have guns.

The soldiers drive all women to the village place. There they have to sit down in the blazing sun, until they hand over the rice. But they don't do it. They sit there with their little children, a few with a baby. Sometimes they sing together. Two boys, about eight years old, bring them some water in big calabashes. The white man allows that. Evening is coming, and then night is coming, but the women don't hand over their rice. That's why they have to remain seated.

The village elders assemble again, offer a bigger sacrifice, and beg Emitai to sweep away their enemies.

Next morning, the French officer is at his wit's end. "All other villages gave the rice," he has translated to them, "only you don't." He orders his soldiers to shoot at anything that moves. When the two boys arrive again with water, a soldier shoots one of them to death. The women get up screaming. They don't care about the order to stay seated; they bring the dead boy to the burial ground, and start singing and dancing there.

The village elders decide to surrender the rice now, to prevent further escalation of the conflict. But the officer is so angry that the women didn't respect his order that he has the men placed in a row. Horrified, the women see that the white man with the pith helmet gestures downward with his hand and orders, "Fire!" Some crackling gunshots are heard, and then the men fall down, one by one. Fourteen. They are all dead. That's the nightmare of Efock. The nightmare that returns over and over, that never

will disappear.

#### Source

The movie *Emitai* (1971) made by the Senegalese director Ousmane Sembène gives a view of an African village in the colonial era.

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### **101. A village in Belarus – 1943 – film**

#### **Remorse**

“I should never have done it,” Flyora thinks, “why didn't I listen to that old farmer? My friend and I made fun of him behind his back. But now it turns out he was right. How could I have been so stupid? In broad daylight.”

Flyora, a blond boy of about twelve, wearing an old army coat, is sitting on the ground, his head bowed low, with both hands in his hair. He has deep lines in his forehead, like an old man.

A few weeks ago Flyora and a friend were digging in a sandy area, looking for a gun. An old farmer caught them doing it, and yelled at them. When the Germans found out what they did, it could have terrible consequences. But when the farmer was gone, they went ahead digging, until they had come across two guns. They wanted to join the partisans in the forests, but you cannot arrive there without a gun, because then they will never accept you.

When Flyora told his mother that he would join the partisans, she began crying desperately. “What should I tell Father, when he comes home and doesn't see you? If you can't have any pity for me, then have pity for your little sisters.” When that didn't work, she brought the axe from the barn, and pushed it in the hands of Flyora. “First, you kill us”. But Flyora didn't change his mind; he winked at his sisters, and slipped away by the back door, with his gun under his coat.

Flyora and his friend were in fact accepted into the partisan camp. Once, when Flyora had to go to the village to deliver a message, he met the same old farmer. He told him that both his parents together with his two little sisters were killed by the Germans. They had gotten a tip.

Flyora's legs gave way, and he sank to the ground. He is desolate, but he cannot cry. All he knows is that he will go back to the partisans, to fight the Germans. What else can he do?

#### Source

The movie *Come and See* (1985) made by the Soviet director Elem Klimov shows the story of one of the more than 600 peasant villages in Belarus, massacred by the Germans.

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### **102. The Netherlands – 1945**

#### **Cheese sandwich**

“My goodness, how slowly this animal walks,” Jan Tulp grumbles softly. “Well, in fact, it isn't her fault, she is also suffering from the war.” A skinny horse pulls the flat cart, where Jan is seated. Next to him sits Michiel, a boy of twelve, who he just has picked up in Amsterdam. A blanket is spread over their laps, because it is quite cold. They drive at walking pace through a wide polder.

“Do you see that church, in the distance? That is our village. You will have a good time staying with us,” Jan says to Michiel. But the boy doesn't answer. “Do you want a cheese sandwich?” The eyes of the boy light up. When he eagerly takes a bite of his sandwich, he tastes cheese for the first time in a long while, delicious cheese. “We will fatten you up, my boy,” Jan says with a wink to the thin boy. “You will like the farm life. You may take care of Maya, our horse. She has been groomed every week, and she gets hay daily. You may give it to her, and in a short time you will be best friends.” Maya tosses her head upwards, as if she hears they are talking about her.

The war is almost over. Everyone is waiting for the Allied Forces. In the cities of the western part of the Netherlands there is almost no food left. People are hungry. Everyone who has relatives or friends in the countryside tries to lodge his children there to gain strength. In the villages there is lack of everything too, but people still have something to eat there. Thank God.

#### Source

In the book *Stukjes en beetjes* (Bits and pieces, 1965) the Dutch author Bernlef describes how villagers care for a city boy in the last year of the Second World War to protect him from hunger.

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### **103. Sardinia, Italy – 1945 (1)**

#### **Sheep thieves**

“Hey, sonny, are there no hares here? I've been walking the whole morning, god-damn, but I didn't see a hare.” “Yes, sir,” I answered, “there are many hares. Sometimes I almost step on them.” I must have been about six years old and my father had taken me along with him to the sheep pen. He had left for the village to take the milk to the dairy factory and I had to take care of the flock. I was happy that a hunter had come along, because I was all alone there, and now at least I could have a chat.

While we were chatting, Rusigabedra, our loyal, strong dog, was tugging at his chain as if I didn't know what was going on. I thought he wanted to be free, and unleashed him. Immediately he made off like mad, with bristling hair, his head near the ground. A few moments later I heard him barking furiously. When I got there, I saw that he had just chased away two young men. “How terrible,” the hunter said, “those guys came to steal a few sheep.” He also left a bit later.

When my father came home on his donkey with the empty milk cans, I told him what had happened. “Now you see that you always have to pay attention,” he answered me immediately. “Those fellows were sheep thieves, herdsman who don't get enough to eat from their boss, and then go stealing a sheep from somewhere else to roast and eat. Fortunately Rusigabedra was there. As I told you before: you always have to pay attention to the dog. He has much better ears and nose than you.”

I am sure the sheep thieves together with the 'hunter' have gone to another flock where another shepherd boy had to look after the sheep all alone, in the hope of scoring a hit. How fortunate we had such a marvellous dog!

### Source

The book *Padre Padrone – My Father, My Master* (1975) is the autobiography of the Italian writer Gavino Ledda. It gives a beautiful description of the hard life of shepherd peasants in the mountains of Sardinia. It is also the story of Ledda's struggle with his tyrannical father.

Part 2, the next page: Locusts - Sardinia, Italy – 1945 (2), story 104.

Part 3: 'Half is half' - Sardinia, Italy – 1956 (3), story 117.

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## **104. Sardinia, Italy – 1945 (2)**

### **Locusts**

Dark clouds surged in front of the sun. It was in the middle of the day, there was no lightning or thunder, but nevertheless it became dark. It was just like many snowflakes swirling down, but they were locusts. I was still a young boy, and I thought it an interesting spectacle. The small insects swarmed over each other and began feeding. After a little while there was nothing left of a shrub, there was no leaf on a tree. The grass had vanished, roots and all.

Only later did I realize how big the disaster was. Soon there was no feed any more for our sheep and donkey. My father and the other herdsmen were desperate. They couldn't get rid of them, whatever they tried. Early morning, when the locusts still were stiff from the cold, we laid down big pieces of cloth and swept as many on it as we could. Then we put the corners together and threw them in big bags. Later on the day my father and the other herdsmen went to the village with the bags. The municipality did give some money for it to stimulate the round-up effort.

It didn't help much. Whole clouds of them came down from the sky and in the meantime females laid thousands of eggs, so that I don't know how many crawled out of the soil. It was quite hopeless to fight against them.

The next year the municipality appointed workers to destroy the locusts with petrol burners. They succeeded in a few places, but after a while the petrol ran out. Finally, arsenic stopped the plague. That poison burned the locusts and the eggs in the soil. The municipality let it be sprayed on a part of the fields. In that way, the sheep could graze on other fields. When the first fields were cleaned by a strong shower, the other fields could be sprayed.

The pigs were the only ones who really enjoyed the locusts. They ran around like mad with their mouths wide open to catch the flying locusts and then closed their jaws to crush and swallow them. They even got fat from them.

### Source

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Sardinia. It is also the story of Ledda's struggle with his tyrannical father.

Part 1: Sheep thieves - Sardinia, Italy – 1945 (1), story 103.

Part 3: 'Half is half' - Sardinia, Italy – 1956 (3), story 117.

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## 105. A village in Western Africa – 1946

### The wizard and the prince

It was night, but fortunately the moon was shining. Salimata ran through the forest avoiding snakes and scratching herself on thorn bushes. She waded through streams and ran hills up and down. Meanwhile, she had Fama in her mind all the time. When she was with Fama, she would be safe.

She was soaking wet from sweating and sat down for a while with her back against a rock. Did she hear something in the jungle? Was Tiémoko following her? Was Tiémoko coming after her? Quickly, she stood up and ran, ran, while her thoughts went to Fama again.

A few years ago Salimata was cut like all the girls in her village. It had gone wrong with her. When she wanted to get up after the cutting and start singing like all the other girls, she instead fainted. When she woke up, an old woman had taken her on her back and had brought her to the wizard Tiécoura. She had lost a lot of blood. With his fetishes, spells, and magic medicines, the wizard would drive away the evil and jealous ghost who was targeting her.

In the night Tiécoura had raped her. When she had cried out in pain, she had seen a ghost slip away through the door. Again, she lost blood, a lot of blood. 'It is the same evil ghost who has attacked you,' the women of the village had said. But Salimata was in a doubt. Ever since then, she was terrified of every man who resembled Tiécoura in any way.

When she was married off to Tiémoko, she cried on the wedding night. He smelled of the wizard, and Salimata couldn't calm her fear. Tiémoko left her because he saw she was possessed by an evil ghost. He locked her up, but she managed to escape and run away.

Once, when she was still a young girl, she had seen Fama dancing at a party. He was the tallest one of all the boys. He was a real prince in his appearance, manner of speaking, and way of gesturing. She fell in love with him immediately. He thought her 'the most beautiful thing he had ever seen in the jungle and the villages.' The memory of this dance and of Fama had given her strength to overcome all the difficulties she had experienced, as young as she was. Now also, she ran and went on running with Fama in her mind. With Fama, she would be safe. With Fama, she would be happy.

#### Source

In his book *The Suns of Independence* (1968), the Ivorian author Ahmadou Kourouma describes the fall of a Western African tribal leader. In a few passages, he tells about the life of poor peasants. Kourouma writes very vividly and doesn't mince his words.

\* \* \*

## 106. A village in Anatolia, Turkey – 1948 (1)

## Village schoolteacher

“Unbelievable! I am such a lucky fellow that I had the chance to get more education than only a few years of village school,” Mahmut Makal contemplates. He is from a peasant family. After the village school he was allowed to attend a 'Village Institute', a sort of high school, especially for village children. For five years he learned all sort of practical things there. For the first time he came into contact with newspapers and magazines. He was crazy about them. His school friends and teachers laughed about it, but he read anything he could get a hold of. “A world opened up to me,” he muses. “I read about so many things that I never had heard about in my village.”

After his schooling Makal is appointed teacher in a village not far from the village where he grew up. “Goodness, it has not been easy. At first most villagers didn't like me, because I was such a 'modern' teacher.” Until then there had been only a Koranic school, where the children had to learn Koran verses by heart and to write Arabic. The villagers still regard the new European script, which Atatürk had introduced to modernise Turkey, as the script of the 'infidels'. “I feel so often that I am a lonely fighter for the revolution of Atatürk.”

What moves Makal most is the dire poverty in the village, particularly in the years with not much rain, which causes a famine. “Unbelievable that the government hardly helps us. We are left to our own resources.”

What enables Makal to keep going is his urge to write. For a national magazine he writes article after article about the situations that he experiences. “All those people in Istanbul and Ankara have no idea of our poverty. But they need to know how all these people in all these villages suffer. Help has to come to modernise the villages, and to wipe out the poverty.”

### Source

The book *A village in Anatolia* (1950-52), written by the Turkish author Mahmut Makal, describes vividly and passionately the peasant life in a very poor region. Makal knows what he talks about. He himself was brought up in such a poor village, teaches in a similar village, and thus has contact with dozens of peasant families.

Part 2: The bullock is worn out - a village in Anatolia, Turkey – 1948 (2), story 107.

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### **107. A village in Anatolia, Turkey – 1948 (2)**

#### **The bullock is worn out**

“Mamit, Mamit, wake up, the bullock is dying,” my mother cries, standing at my bedside. “I don't dare to wake up father, he would have a heart attack. Come to the stable.” It is springtime, and the school where I am the teacher is closed for the annual holiday break. I had come to visit my parents, who live in a nearby village. With the two bullocks of my parents I started ploughing, early this morning, because that had to be done urgently. I pull my coat on and walk to the stable. The poor animal lies down on the ground, at the point of death. The other bullock, his mate, walks around him anxiously. What can we do?

In fact, it is no wonder that the bullock has fallen ill. It has only rained a little bit in the summer, and my parents had very little hay or other feed. In the middle of the winter the feed was almost finished. Today the bullocks did their best! But the ground was hard as stone, and they had eaten almost nothing for months. I did give them half of my bread, but that isn't much for a bullock. No wonder that their strength is finished.

Finally mother dares to wake up my father, and also my little brother and sister, and my uncle and the neighbours. Everyone sits around the bullock, crying. Everyone sympathizes with us. Because I am exhausted by the ploughing, I return to my bed after some time. When my mother enters the room, of course I ask immediately about the bullock. She tells me that my uncle together with the neighbours have gotten the bullock up on his feet and have fed him some sour grass. "Your uncle said, that he will get over it," says my mother. "He doesn't have a deadly disease. Tomorrow, we will give him some yogurt with garlic."

### Source

The book *A village in Anatolia* (1950-52), written by the Turkish author Mahmut Makal, describes vividly and passionately the peasant life in a very poor region. Makal knows what he talks about. He himself was brought up in such a poor village, teaches in a similar village, and thus has contact with dozens of peasant families.

Part 1: Village schoolteacher - a village in Anatolia, Turkey – 1948 (1), story 106.

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## **108. A village on the coast of Sicily, Italy – 1948**

### **A brawl, and a new insight**

"Why do you think they released me? Well! I did something against the law. They could have hauled me to court, and given me two months in prison. Isn't that right?" Ntoni, a strong young fisherman with curly black hair, talks loudly and heatedly to his younger brother Cola, who doesn't know how to reply.

Yesterday there had been quite a big brawl on the pier. It was early morning, the small fishing boats had just returned with the fish caught during the night to sell to the merchants. As usual, they offered a disgracefully low price, and they refused flatly to give one lira more. The whole night the fishermen had laboured on the sea, they had gotten a good catch, but they got almost nothing for it. They lived in poverty, and the fish merchants pocketed the profits. That had been going on since time immemorial, till the pent-up anger came to a head, yesterday.

One of the younger fishermen, who could not control himself, had thrown a set of scales into the water, and that was the trigger for the other young men to attack the hated fish merchants. Soon the carabinieri arrived, arrested a dozen fighting fishermen, and brought them to the big police office in the nearby town, Catania. To their surprise, the fishermen were released the next day, and brought back in a truck to their village, Aci Trezza. There, they were welcomed as heroes.

"Of course the carabinieri were not obliged to release us," Ntoni goes on emotionally, "but I am certain they got a message from the fish merchants to let us go. They are afraid of the anger among the fishermen, the anger in the village. They need us! We are their drudges. When we no longer work for

them, they will lose their comfortable life of luxury.” “Yes, they need us, but we also can't do without them,” Cola counters, “when they don't buy our fish, we will have no money to buy bread and wine.”

“There must be a solution,” Ntoni continues, now in a lower voice, with a meditative look in his dark eyes. Slowly, an idea takes shape in his mind. “We have to break free from them. We have to sell our fish ourselves, we have to set up for ourselves. Cola, you must understand it, and the others also. We have to set up for ourselves. We all should understand that.” Then, a smile appears on Ntoni’s face.

### Source

The movie *La terra trema* (The Earth Trembles, 1948) from the Italian director Luchini Visconti gives a splendid and lifelike picture of a small fishing village. All the actors are villagers who play themselves.

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## **109. A village in Northern Italy – 1948**

### **A real friend**

“Please, tell me why did you leave?” Nuto looks at me with his black eyes that are so dreamy sometimes, but now they are sharp. “Well, why does a person leave?” I answer. “I don't know. Perhaps, because I was a bastard, a peasant boy, a servant, nothing more. I was nothing.” Together with Nuto I am sitting by the reeds near the river Belbo. How often we have played here together with the other village boys, swum, caught fish, and fought also, when I was called a bastard again.

Nuto was three years older than me. He talked to me, he told me what he had seen on other farms, and explained to me that there was more than the few hills where we lived, the fields we knew. That trains went everywhere, up to the sea. And that there were ships that went to other countries. He told me about the war, and that people were provoked by it. By him, I understood that you could not only talk about what you had eaten, about the work you had to do, or about a quarrel. But that you also could say something about what happened in the world. That by talking you could come to understand your life. He was a real friend to me.

I was conscripted in Genoa. When my service ended, I went to America. There I travelled from station to station, from one state to the next. Here I worked on a farm, there as a milk vendor or highway worker. I had a lot of girlfriends, but soon I knew that I wanted to return home. That America was not my country. At a certain moment I had made a fortune without wanting it especially. I had a construction company, employed people, had a few trucks. Then I came back home.

In my village nobody recognized me. I had been away for twenty years. I had become fat and rich. I stayed in the hotel on the village square. But Nuto immediately recognized me, when I entered his carpenter's workshop. He took off his work apron, and took me for a walk. And again we talked like it was yesterday. But now it was just like we were the same age. Nuto had witnessed the fascists, the war, the partisans. But I had seen quite a lot of the world.

I told him toughly that I might be a bastard, but I still succeeded. “Don't talk like that,” he said, “okay, you succeeded, but how many wretches did not succeed? You should think about that. We have to help them. We have to change the world. You too.” I had found my old friend again.



### Source

*The Moon and the Bonfires* (1950) from the Italian author Cesare Pavese is a charming, sensitive novel about the peasant life.

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## **110. West Bengal, India – around 1950**

### **The zamindar takes the land of a peasant**

In a loud voice, the magistrate of the court reads the judgment: “Accused Shambu Mahto has to repay his debt of 235 rupees within three months. When he fails, his land will be auctioned.”

Shambu cannot believe his ears. He runs to the railing and shouts to the judge: “I will never be able to pay this. I am a poor peasant. I have an old father, a wife, and a young son. When you take away my land, we will have nothing. We will die of hunger.” He bursts into tears. Firmly, the court's guard takes his arm and pushes him out of the court-house.

Later on, Shambu sits at the border of his field. His wife brings him some food, but he cannot get it passed his lips.

His debt to the *zamindar* (the big land owner and also moneylender of the village) is not 235 rupees, absolutely not. Yes, it is true that he received five sacks of rice during the famine last year. But his father worked for it a whole year in the date garden of the zamindar. The bookkeeper did not note it in the cash-book and also has also did not give him receipts. That's why he was floored in the court.

For God's sake, how could he gather 235 rupees? He is a poor peasant. In his whole life, he has never seen 50 rupees together. He owns only a small piece of land, only two bigha (0.7 acres). Already seven generations have lived from this land. And now he would lose it because the zamindar wants his land to build a factory on it? He will not allow it. Never!

What can he do? Perhaps his neighbour is right. The only thing he can do is go to the big city. He is ready to try his hand at anything. He will become coolie or rickshaw puller. Day and night, he will work like a horse for three months. With the help of God, he will be able to save his land.

### Source

*Do Bigha Zamin (Two Acres of land or Calcutta, the Cruel City)* (1953) is a feature film of the Indian director Bimal Roy. It portrays the happiness and grief of peasants. Roy also shows how hard the life is in Calcutta (Kolkata) for poor peasants who migrate to the city. He focuses on injustice but also shows the friendship and support the poor give and receive. Nice songs cheer up the movie.

\* \* \*

## **111. A little village in Kenya – 1950**

### **'The most beautiful land in the whole country'**

Together they walk over the rolling landscape, a white man with a wide-brimmed hat on top of a red

puffy face, and a black man, tall and lean, with three deep furrows on his forehead. They are both about the same age, around 55 years old. “How beautiful the land looks,” Mr. Howlands, the white man, says, and his eyes shine. With a large handkerchief he wipes the sweat from his forehead. “Yes indeed,” Ngotho answers, “this is the most beautiful land in the whole country.”

“Stephen has no feelings for the land,” the white man says to himself quietly, “will my son ever take over the plantation?” Ngotho's heart leaps with joy – will Mr. Howlands return to his country, far away? Will the prophecy of the great visionary Mugo wa Kibiro at long last be fulfilled? Will he finally get back his land?

When Ngotho was born, the British were already in control of his country. As a young man he was compelled to fight in 'the Great War.' Several times he narrowly escaped death. When he returned after the war, exhausted, his old father had been evicted from his land. It had gone into the hands of a white man, who, like himself, had fought in the war, and couldn't get his bearings in England any longer. Ngotho had become his farm hand. It was the only way to be on the land of his ancestors every day, and to stay in contact with his beloved spirits. Like a father and a mother at the same time, he takes care of the land, the trees and the shrubs. He loves the land. He is the trusted right hand man of Mr. Howlands.

Long, long ago, the great seer Mugo wa Kibiro had predicted that the whites would come, that they would step by step gain control of the land; but that one day they would return to their own country. That wisdom keeps Ngotho going. “Oh, Murungo, creator of the earth with everything that is living upon it,” the old man murmurs, “let it be that I always can go on caring for this land of my dear ancestors.”

#### Source

The short novel *Weep not, child* (1964) from the Kenyan author Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o describes the last years of the British colonisation.

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### **112. A fishing village on the coast of Cuba – 1951**

#### **The old fisherman**

Quietly the boy opens the door of the hut. He almost can't believe his eyes. On the bed lies 'the old man'. Quickly he walks toward the man, and bends down near his head. Thankfully, he is still breathing. Then, he sees the hands. It brings tears to his eyes. They are completely ripped open. It must have been an awful struggle. “I'll be right back,” he whispers. In the cafe he gets a pot of hot coffee with a lot of milk and sugar.

It has been anxious days for Manolin, the boy. He is ten years old, and has an earnest face with dark, questioning eyes. Many times he has gone fishing with Santiago – as the old fisherman is actually named – on his small boat. But his parents have put him on another boat, because Santiago hadn't caught any fish for a long time. For months he hadn't had any luck. Every evening Manolin comes to visit the old one in his hut, because he has grown attached to him.

Santiago had gone fishing alone. “Once I will be lucky,” he had said to the boy. “And then, I'll make

sure to be prepared for anything. As a fisherman you always have to be alert, that's what really counts." One night the old one hadn't returned with his little boat. Two nights, three nights. The coast guard had searched with boats and air-planes. Manolin had been desperate.

Manolin sits at the bedside of the old one. When he opens his eyes, Manolin pours him a cup of coffee. "Please, drink a bit, it will do you good, and then get some more sleep." When the old one is well rested, and has eaten something, he tells the whole story. That finally he had gotten a bite. That a huge animal was on the hook, which dragged the boat along over the ocean. For days. When the animal was exhausted from dragging and hunger, it finally came to the surface. It turned out to be a splendid swordfish. It had been a terrible fight, but at long last he managed to plunge his harpoon through the heart of the fish.

"But then, my son, I had to return. I was far from the coast. I was alone. I tied the fish to the side of the boat. But you see where this is going, soon sharks came at it. I still could kill a few of them. But finally they succeeded in devouring my beautiful swordfish. I thought I would be rich, but I was too far from the coast. I am an old fool."

"You are not," the boy answers, "you all alone defeated that swordfish. I have seen how big he is, because his carcass is still attached to your boat. I will start fishing again with you. Whether my parents like it or not. Then there will be two of us. I have got a lot to learn."

#### Source

*The old man and the sea* (1952) is a splendid short novel of the American writer Ernest Hemingway about the life of a poor fisherman.

\* \* \*

### **113. Refugee camp in Jenkin, Palestine – 1953**

#### **The olives are ripe**

"How long have we already been living here, how long have I been missing my dear Ishmael," Dalai asks herself. Her gaze is fixed. She will never forget that morning in July 1948. Zionists had bombed their village In Hod. She had lost almost her whole family. Afterwards, heavily armed soldiers came to lead away the survivors. In the chaos of that day, she lost her baby Ishmael. She never saw him again. Since that day she hardly ever laughs. "Oh, he would have been five years old now. Would he still be alive?"

Dalai is a Bedouin. She is from a poor farm labourer's family. During the terror of the Zionist attack, poor and rich farmers, farm labourers, and owners of big olive orchards were driven together to Jenkin, where a tent camp came into being. Later on the tents were replaced one by one by little mud houses.

"My daughter, I have to go", Dalai hears a familiar voice saying. It is her father-in-law Yahveh. She is surprised when she sees him in the best clothes he still has, impeccably shaved, his moustache points nicely curled up. Dalia looks at him inquiringly. "I cannot go on sitting here any more, I have to go to our village, the olives are ripe." "Don't do it, father," Dalia cries out, "the soldiers will kill you." But nobody can stop Yehya.

Everyone in the refugee camp fears the worst. Sixteen days later Yehya returns. Now he looks like a

beggar. His clothes are muddy, and he has scratches everywhere. But he is beaming. He has olives with him, and figs, and citrons. In the evening there is a party. People laugh and sing, cry and dance, and everyone tastes the olives, one by one, as if it is the most precious food on earth. Yehya tells about his journey in great colour and detail. For a while, Dalia can forget her sorrow.

#### Source

The book *Mornings in Jenin* (2006) from the American-Palestinian writer Susan Abulhawab tells about Palestinian villagers who are expelled from their land, and have to survive in a refugee camp.

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### **114. A village in South-east Nigeria – 1953**

#### **The bride price**

When Ezekiel Odi suddenly died, Ma Blackie, his widow, didn't know what to do. In the city of Lagos, everything was expensive. Without the income of her husband, it was impossible for her and her two children to survive. She had no choice but to go back to Ibuza on the west bank of the Niger river to the village where she and Ezekiel were raised. There, she could move in with Okonkwo, her husband's oldest brother.

For Nna-nndo and Aku-nna, Ma Blackie's son and daughter, the transition from the big city to the peasant village was huge. Shortly after they moved, Okonkwo married Ma Blackie, making her his fourth wife, which made him the legal father of Nna-nndo and Aku-nna. With this new arrangement, they had to resign themselves to the rules of this traditional, old man.

Aku-nna quickly became part of a group of girls of her age, but she often felt alone. She was not only missing her father, but her mother now had little time for her. She had become entirely occupied by the big household of her new husband. Aku-nna's friends were nice, but all the girls' habits were so different here. And she was not as brave and strong as these village girls, who had assisted in the fieldwork since childhood.

Moreover, she was thirteen years old, would likely start menstruate soon, and then Okonkwo would marry her off. Her friends continuously chattered about boyfriends, family heads who had proposed marriage, and their upcoming weddings.

Aku-nna didn't want to think about marrying one of the rough village boys or becoming the youngest wife of an older farmer who already had a family. She yearned to become a teacher and marry a modern man.

Fortunately, her school teacher paid a lot of attention to her. Chike Ofulue was a handsome, friendly, young man, and soon they fell madly in love. However, Chike's family were *oshus*, formerly slaves. Aku-nna knew that the last thing a free man like Okonkwo would do is marry his daughter to a slave-family, how much the Ofulue family would be willing to pay as a bride price.

After the British abolished slavery, many families had sent their slaves to the missionaries. These former slaves were welcomed and educated. They went on to become the teachers, lawyers, and engineers of modern Nigeria, a country which would soon become independent. Chike's father had been headmaster for many years and was considered a well-to-do man as a result.

Ma Blackie warned her daughter sternly not to go too far with Chike no matter how nice he was. “Don't bring shame upon me!” she shouted once threateningly.

However, every week Aku-nna went to the market with a bunch of bananas on her head to 'sell'. On the way, she would stop at a bush near the Niger and meet her great love. She would throw her bananas in the river, and Chike would give her money to take home for their sale. For hours, they would sit together in the shadow near the river, out of sight from any passers-by. They talked about everything but could also sit together silently. Other times, they sang songs. The hours that passed when they were together were lovely.

“Do you think your father will manage to arrange our marriage with such an old-fashioned man like Okonkwo?” Aku-nna would ask. Chike reassured Aku-nna, “Of course. My father will offer him such a high bride price that your father will not say 'no.' You surely know how eager he is to get the money.” Then, they would go on dreaming about their future life together.

#### Source

In the book *The bride price* (1976), the Nigerian writer Buchi Emecheta describes the life in a small village overhauled by the new times. She pays special attention to the difficult position of women in this time of transition.

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### **115. A small Japanese island – 1954**

#### **The sea god favours them**

Radiant with happiness, Shinji and Hatsue climb the long stairs together. Two hundred stone steps lead through a forest to the top of a mountain on the island of Uta-jima, where the altar stands for Watasumi no'Mikoto, the sea god. Shinji is a young eighteen-year-old fisherman. He has a big, still-alive sea fish in his hand. His face is already a bit weathered by the sun and the sea breeze. Hatsue, a bit younger than Shinji, is a diver. Her face is also tanned, but her skin is smoothed by the sea water.

Both of them have so much energy that they could run up the stairs all at once, but this time they prefer to walk quietly, hand in hand, to enjoy their happiness all the more intensely. Halfway up they look out across the bay. In the sky float a few white clouds, and the water is deep blue. Both say nothing, but they think the same: our island is the nicest place on earth.

When they come to the top and stand in front of the altar of Watasumi, Shinji claps his hands to let the sea god know that two worshippers have arrived at his shrine. In silence he begins thanking the sea god for all the happiness he has granted them. Hatsue prays with her head bowed so deeply that Shinji sees her brown neck and has to swallow.

Her life hasn't been easy, Hatsue reflects. When she was still young and her mother died, her father sent her to family members on another small island. There she learned to dive for sponges to contribute to the family income. When her father grew old and the other children left home, he brought her back to Uta-jima. There she met Shinji, the tough but modest young fisherman. It was love at first sight. Both wanted nothing more than to marry as soon as possible, but the father of Hatsue didn't even want to hear about it. He had set his sights on a young man from a well-to-do family.

Nasty gossip in the fishing village, outbursts of anger from her stubborn father, a ban on leaving home, except when Shinji was fishing, and rivers of tears have been Hatsue's experience the last year. When she became more and more pale and weak, her father started to have doubts, and when in a village quarrel the boy from the well-off family turned out to be a liar and a weakling, and Shinji honest and selfless, he finally gave his consent.

Shinji knocks on the window of the small priest house, presents the fish to the priest, and asks him to offer it to the sea god to thank him, and to ask for happiness in their coming marriage.

#### Source

The short novel *The Sound of Waves* (1954) of the Japanese author Yukio Mishima describes in detail the fishing life on a small island, and is at the same time a moving love story.

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### **116. A small village in Vietnam – 1955 (1)**

#### **Class analysis**

“Please, listen to me, my dear sister Quê, it is time to put an end to it. Tôn may be your husband, but don't speak a word to him any more!” Stunned, Quê looks at her brother Chinh. There are tears in her eyes. “Tôn is everything I have. What do you have against him? He is your brother-in-law. I'm married to him.” “Quê, Tôn is the class enemy. He is a land owner, an exploiter. From now on the proletariat is in power, together with landless peasants. We will crush the exploiters.”

It is 1955. The French are the losers. The communists have won. A few years ago Chinh had signed up for the resistance. At the liberation many soldiers returned to the villages, but not Chinh. He only came back half a year later. He was appointed section head, and he started to carry out the land reform, on which the revolutionary government had decided.

Quê is sobbing all huddled up. “I don't understand this. You know the village. You know who is good, and who not. We all know it. Tôn and his family have some rice fields. So what! They have always helped others, they have always worked hard in the field. During the harvest season they have day labourers. What's wrong with that? They are paid well, and get good meals. And, and ...” Quê stumbles over her words. She is a pretty young woman, about twenty years old. Actually she has a delicate face. But now it looks more like a wrung-out dish cloth.

“Quê, stop that sobbing,” Chinh reacts, exasperated. “It is about a class analysis. I became section head, because our family never had a scrap of land. Father was an herbal doctor, but for the rest, we have always lived by working on the fields of others. When someone informs the Party that my sister is married to a land owner, I am finished. For half a year I attended a staff course, I classified all families of our village by their class position, and ...”

Quê doesn't listen any more. She has always loved her brother Chinh. During the war she had prayed so often to the ancestors to protect him. But now she doesn't understand him any more.

### Source

The novel *Paradise of the Blind* (1988) written by the Vietnamese author Duong Thu Huong tells about a poor girl, growing up in Hanoi. From her mother she hears stories about the small village where she came from.

Part 2: Mayor Duong - a small village in Vietnam – 1989 (2), story 141.

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### **117. Sardinia, Italy – 1956 (3)**

#### **'Half is half'**

“Okay, half is for Don Pedru. That isn't all right, because we had to do all the work, and he didn't raise a finger. But that's just the way it is. But it makes me mad that even that is not enough for him.” Juanne, 18 years old, talks with his friends with whom he soon will emigrate to the mines in Holland.

“Last week he came to our sheep pen to divide the apples. One basket for him, and one for us. He filled our basket up to the brim, and stroked over it with a stick. So one or a few apples rolled down, naturally to his side. He piled his own basket heaping full. But then, he didn't use his stick. Inside I was boiling mad, because that is the way it goes every year. At the end he knocked over our basket with his stick, so that the apples rolled to his side. For sure he had at least twice as many apples as we did.”

Juane's face has reddened, and he has to catch his breath. “Do you think that my father says anything about it? Not at all! He is sitting there like a stick-in-the-mud and doesn't say anything. I shout at Don Pedru, “Stop it now.” I am ready to fight, but he looks at me patronizingly and says “Hey, brat, keep out of it.” “Leave that to us,” says my father, “we know how it should be”. “Half is half, that's how it should be,” I shout. Then my father hits me in the face with the flat of his hand. Unbelievable! “If we didn't have Don Pedru, we still would be living in poverty, and when he evicts us we will be in poverty again,” says my father angrily.”

“Then I said no more about it. Soon we will emigrate. It is really unbearable here.”

### Source

The book *Padre Padrone – My Father, My Master* (1975) is the autobiography of the Italian writer Gavino Ledda. It gives a beautiful description of the hard life of shepherd peasants in the mountains of Sardinia. It is also the story of Ledda's struggle with his tyrannical father.

Part 1: Sheep thieves - Sardinia, Italy – 1945 (1), story 103.

Part 2: Locusts - Sardinia, Italy – 1945 (2), story 104.

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### **118. A village in Cameroon – 1958 (1)**

#### **The basis of my life**

The woman lays a colourful, thick notebook on the table and sits down with some difficulty. Her bones are aching. She has become old. She takes her ballpoint pen and opens the notebook. "My name is Halla," she writes down, "Halla Fitini, which means 'Little Halla'. I am named after my grandmother, 'Big Halla'." Then her mind starts wandering. She has experienced so many things in her life. The independence struggle, the brutalities of the French occupiers, the happiness of the new beginning, the terrible corruption which soon began. She had fled her home village because of her violent father, and found a job in a city as a singer, and later on as a theatre director. Now that she is old, it is time to write down her memories.

"My name is Halla, Halla Fitini. I was raised in a small, remote village, Massébè. There was no road, only a few footpaths to other villages. Around thirty families lived there.

I had such a wonderful childhood there, even though my father was not there most of the time and my mother often had left for her family. In fact I was brought up by Grandpa Helly, and Grandma, Big Halla. Grandpa took me with him to the forest to cut cane and bamboo, to collect medicinal plants, and to set snares. Or he showed me the cacao trees and coffee plants at his plantation. He also showed me how he made furniture and baskets and beautiful rattan wickerwork. In the evening he pointed out the constellations, and taught me their names.

Later on, because I was his favourite granddaughter, I was allowed to come along with him to the secret meetings of the Mbombock, where wise old men, whispering, transmitted ancient knowledge about life and the universe.

Often I also went with my grandmother and my little sisters to work on the land. We left very early, when it was still a little dark. Grandma took some glowing embers with her, and the first thing we did when we arrived at the field was to make a little fire, because it was so cold in the early morning. We ate a bit, and then started working hard to get warm, and to keep the insects at bay. Grandma taught us songs which made the work easier, more pleasant. When it got hot, we picked some vegetables, pulled some tubers, and went home."

The old woman pushes the notebook away. All that attention of Grandpa Helly, and Grandma Big Halla, and all their stories and wise counsel, in fact formed the basis of my whole life. Until now it supports me.

### Source

The Cameroonian author Werewere Liking depicts in her novel *La mémoire amputée* (2004) the life of a village girl, who ends up in the city, always longing for her village.

Part 2: Revenge - a village in Cameroon – 1958 (2), story 119.

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## **119. A village in Cameroon – 1958 (2)**

### **Revenge**

Tears well up in Halla Fitini's eyes. At that time she was only a seven-year-old girl. She would like to never remember it again, but she has to do it now. She has become old, and she feels death



approaching. It is time now to write down her memories. She swallows.

“I see the picture perfectly in my mind, as though it happened yesterday. With one arm I was tied to Uncle Ngan Njock, and with the other to Uncle Minkéng Mi Ndjé. French soldiers had tied all of us together, and had brought us to the forest. “Fire,” shouts the commander. A soldier who is standing right next to me looks around helplessly. “Fire!” shouts the commander again, but more angrily now. The soldier turns around and shoots indeed. The head of Uncle Ngan Njock bursts open. Blood gushes out of it.

After the shooting – twelve men are slaughtered – we all lie on the ground, dead and living together. The French soldiers have gone away. We lie there, together, in complete silence, we cannot comprehend what has happened. I see swarms of green flies laying tiny white eggs in the blood-covered head of my uncle.

After a few hours Grandpa Helly and a few other old men come out of the forest to us. They have escaped the soldiers, because they understand the art of making themselves invisible. They untie the ropes.

A week earlier, we had received the message that French soldiers would come to search every inch of our forest, looking for freedom fighter Mpôdôl. The men of our village decided that they would never cooperate. They discussed what to do. They would dig pitfalls, pronounce secret charms, and whatever else. There was only one gun in our village, a hunting rifle with only one bullet. With this they would eliminate the commander.

The helicopters were already arriving while they were still discussing it. Everyone fled into the forest. The sole bullet was indeed fired at the commander, and some lead went into his shoulder. He was bleeding considerably. One of the villagers disinfected a knife above a fire, and removed the lead pellets. Then the commander was bandaged. Next morning a message arrived from the capital that twelve men should be executed.”

### Source

The Cameroonian author Werewere Liking depicts in her novel *La mémoire amputée* (2004) the life of a village girl, who ends up in the city, always longing for her village.

Part 1: The basis of my life - a village in Cameroon – 1958 (1), story 118.

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## **120. French Alps – 1960**

### **'First they take your land and then your children'**

“First they take your land and then your children,” her father had cried although he never shouted. He was quite the opposite. He liked joking, winking at her. But the factory was his 'enemy.' When he heard his wife saying that Régis, their oldest son, should start working at the factory, he exploded.

Odil's father was the only one who had refused to sell his land and farm to the factory. This meant that they were now entirely surrounded by enormous smelters, giant factory buildings, and heaps of slag from the mining operations. The factory waste became its own mountain, growing higher and higher. Although the company doubled and even tripled its offer for the land, her father would not sell

the farm. "I don't sell my heritage," he used to say.

Each year, an engineer came to the village school and drew some mountains and a river on the blackboard. He drew their mountains and their river! He drew the dam and its reservoir to explain how hydroelectricity was generated. He described it as 'white gold'.

Only a few boys of the village wanted to work for this company, so it had to hire labourers from Spain, Portugal, or anywhere with willing, able-bodied young men. Once Odil went there to look around and became friends with Stepan, a Russian guy. He was nineteen years old, a little bit older than she. "The furnaces are a thousand degrees," Stepan had told her. "When you empty a furnace, you have to be careful where to position yourself. One step too close, and the furnace will scorch your hair. One step too far, and the icy wind of the mountains will freeze you.

Odil and Stepan loved to be together.

One day Odil went to visit Stepan. The workers she knew gave her a strange reaction. They refused to look at her, walking by with their heads towards the ground. Nobody wanted to say anything until an Italian named Giuliano arrived. He told her that Stepan had died. Odil asked to see him. "Niente," Giuliano shouted with tears in his eyes. Later on, she learned that Stepan had been poisoned by the toxic fumes of the furnaces. He became disoriented and fell into the boiling metal. His body was consumed by the furnace, and nothing was left of him.

Odil had moved to a small city nearby. She lived in a room there and worked in a metal factory where she punched holes in small plates which were affixed to the back of radios. She punched 1,700 holes a day. She went to the farm on most weekends. By this time, her father had died, and her mother had sold the cows. Now, there were only goats and chickens. The trees in the orchards had died. The heaps of slag had piled higher. Odil helped to cook marmalade and to can beans from the kitchen garden. She fed the chickens and milked the goats. As she did this, she would see her father in her mind. He would be winking at her.

### Source

The book *Once in Europe* (part 2 of the trilogy *Into their Labours* – 1987) of the English writer John Berger contains a series of short stories about the peasant life in the small French mountain village where Berger has lived since the middle of the seventies. See also story 23: *From another world*.

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## **121. Taurus Mountains, Turkey – around 1960 (1)**

### **The sly muhtar**

The village is fermented. It is the old song every year again. The *muhtar* (village-head) fools the villagers.

Every autumn the whole village migrates from the Taurus Mountains to the plain to pick cotton for a month or two and earn some money. It is a huge endeavour every time. Babies, small children, elderly persons, disabled ones, sick people, everyone comes along. Nobody remains in the village. Only a few families have a horse or a donkey. The rest have to carry all of their luggage on their backs. And also the ill persons and the old ones who cannot walk.

They have to cross the mountains. That is not easy especially not with all that luggage. But also the cutting cold ... You can be caught in a terrible thunder, and then you have to dry up fast enough not to catch pneumonia.

However, after all this, the villagers never discover a rich cotton field. Always, it is a barren field with little cotton to pick where the families cannot earn much money. This is because of the muhtar. As the village-head, he decides at which cotton farm the villagers go to pick. He chooses a farm where no other village wants to harvest because the cotton shrubs are so meagre. Secretly, the muhtar accepts generous pay from the landlord to tell his villagers that 'unfortunately' the good fields have already been given away to other villages.

This will be the year of change: Long Ali, Taşbaşoğlu and a few other obstinate villagers decided. This year, they will look for a cotton farmer themselves and make a contract without a bribe. So finally they will earn properly. Already for months, Long Ali and Taşbaş have discussed the issue with their fellow-villagers. They have succeeded in convincing quite a few. The majority of the village will go with Long Ali and Taşbaş. The rest will stay at the side of the muhtar for fear of him or because they are relatives.

When it becomes clear for the muhtar that his position is wavering, he visits all the families one by one. He speaks honeyed words to some and promises them splendid things. Other ones he threatens with law, gendarmes, and prison, scolding them loudly. In the end, the muhtar manages to get almost all the villagers behind him.

Just to teach them a lesson, he arranges a most miserable field for his villagers. Through this he informs them who forever is the chief of the village.

Long Ali and Taşbaş are extremely disappointed, but they decide to go on. Next year, the villagers will seize their opportunity. Ali and Taşbaş will take care of it themselves.

### Source

The Turkish author Yaşar Kemal describes in *The Wind from the Plain* (1960, part 1 of his Anatolian Trilogy) the grinding poverty of small farmers – their bitterness and anger but also their imaginative stories, joy, and care. Expertly he describes the natural beauty of the mountains.

Part 2: The saint - Taurus Mountains, Turkey – around 1960 (2), story 122.

Part 3: Nobody talks to the muhtar any more - Taurus Mountains, Turkey – around 1960 (3), story 123.

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## **122. Taurus Mountains, Turkey – around 1960 (2)**

### **The saint**

“No, no, I am not a saint!” Taşbaşoğlu screams in desperation. “I am an ordinary person, just like you, just like everyone.” When he ceases raging and the villagers walk away, they whisper to each other, “Saints are just like that. They ignore it for the sake of humility. We have a humble saint.”

Taşbaş can understand it. There is poverty in the village, grinding poverty. The soil becomes more and more exhausted. The harvests are a bit smaller every year, the wheat stock is finished earlier, and the period from hunger to the next harvest is longer.

On top of that, the farmers are terrified of Adil *Effendi*, the shop owner from the town nearby. Like every year, they bought everything on credit, which was wildly expensive. Like every year, the villagers would have paid off their debts when they had earned money from the cotton picking on the plain. But this year, this didn't bring in much because they had a very poor field. The cotton shrubs were so meagre that there was little to harvest. Accordingly, there was little income.

The farmers are scared to death that Adil *Effendi* will come to their village with five or ten gendarmes. That he will take away everything from them: the *bulgur* (groats of wheat), the livestock, the decoration of the women, the carpet upon which they are sitting, and perhaps also their mattresses and clothes. This winter, they will perish from hunger and cold when the snowstorms are blowing. If not all, at least the children, the elderly and the sick will die.

Taşbaş feels pity for the farmers. He understands their fear and despair only too well. He knows they need a 'saint' as a last straw, to grasp at, to keep a last bit of courage, to find the strength to defend themselves against Adil. That is the way of things.

Taşbaş is afraid. He knows how it comes to an end with saints. At some point the gendarmes arrest you. In a police cell in the city, they beat you up for days and then they lock you up in a prison or send you to a lunatic asylum. This is when you do not end up at the gallows. What can he do?

#### Source

The Turkish author Yaşar Kemal describes in *Iron Earth, Copper Sky* (1963, part 2 of his Anatolian Trilogy) the poverty, fear and superstition of the peasants but also the beautiful nature and the splendid, imaginative stories of the village singer. He tells about oppression by the moneylender, the village head and the state but also about the creativity and determination of the peasants to find a way out. He paints the anger and bitterness, the slander and hostility but also the carefulness and mutual commitment.

Part 1: The sly muhtar - Taurus Mountains, Turkey – around 1960 (1), story 121.

Part 3: Nobody talks to the muhtar any more - Taurus Mountains, Turkey – around 1960 (3), story 123.

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### **123. Taurus Mountains, Turkey – around 1960 (3)**

#### **Nobody talks to the muhtar any more**

Furious is *muhtar* (village head) Sefer. Nobody in the village talks to him any more not even his own wives and children. It is driving him crazy. Also in the town, everyone laughs at him, even to his face. He is put to shame before the whole world.

Almost like a nightmare, the muhtar remembers again and again where it began. Secretly, very secretly, he went to the police office in the town nearby. He painted Taşbaşoğlu as black as he could: “That so called 'saint' is deceiving the villagers with his laying on of hands. That cannot exist any more in modern Turkey, in the time of space travel and atom bombs. On top of it, he enrages the peasants at the government and the administration.”

Two gendarmes came to arrest Taşbaş. The villagers stayed around silently. The atmosphere was highly explosive. Any moment they could jump on the gendarmes all together, whether they had guns or not.

Taşbaş stayed there with his head bent. Never had he wanted to be a saint. The villagers had branded him a saint, because they didn't see a way out of their poverty and because he already criticized the corrupt muhtar overtly for years.

When the gendarmes brought Taşbaş away, he turned around at the village border. Now he stood upright and confident. All the villagers stood with him in a circle. He rested his eye on each one of them one by one. Calmly he said, “You will not hurt the muhtar in any way although according to the four holy books, he deserves to be killed. But you will never speak a word to him. Not one of you. Not a single word!”

The muhtar groans. This is worse than being killed.

### Source

The Turkish author Yaşar Kemal describes in *The Undying Grass* (1968, part 3 of his Anatolian Trilogy) how poverty in a small village inflames violence. The despair and bitterness seek a way out. Kemal portrays the beautiful nature in the mountains and makes us feel the ruthless heat of the plain, where the villagers pick cotton for a few months a year.

Part 1: The sly muhtar - Taurus Mountains, Turkey – around 1960 (1), story 121.

Part 2: The saint - Taurus Mountains, Turkey – around 1960 (2), story 122.

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## **124. Santhiu-Niaye, West Senegal – 1965**

### **A griot never keeps his mouth shut**

Followed by his wife Gnagna Guissé and the girl Khar Madaigua Diob, griot Déthyè Law leaves the village of Santhiu-Niaye. For the last time he turns around, put his hands to his mouth and sings loudly the call to prayer. The wind carries the sound to the village. Then together they start walking west through the *niaye*, with its beautiful landscape of undulating dunes, cactuses, thorn shrubs, and lakes covered with water lilies.

Khar carries a newborn baby on her back. She is cast out by her village. She has become pregnant without being married. Ngoné War Thiandum, her mother, was appalled. She had always dreamed of a son-in-law from a family as prominent as her own family and of a splendid wedding-party. Now she could forget it.

“Who was the father?” Ngoné wanted to know, but Khar didn't tell her. By all means Ngoné tried to get the name out of her: with reasonable arguments, concerned, irritated, angry, but Khar kept persisted in holding her tongue.

The village-gossip pointed the finger to Atoumane, a poor peasant who in the wet season worked for the prominent families, when there was a lot of work to do on the land. He swore on the Holy Book that he had done nothing wrong, but the village elders thought that he had to be the culprit, and decided to drive him away from Santhiu.

Déthyè had condemned the decision. He was not of a distinguished family; he was only a cobbler, but at the same time also a *griot*, a poet-singer who keeps the village history alive. A *griot* has the right to criticize bluntly, and that was what Déthyè did, according to the saying 'a real *griot* never keeps his

mouth shut, when injustice takes place'.

Later on Khar blurted out that she was pregnant by her own father. Her mother, was shocked and furious with her husband. She wanted to talk with him about it, but he refused. He sent her away brusquely.

When the village-gossip then blamed Khar for it, because she could have seduced her father, and the village elders decided to expel her from the village as well, this was the last straw for the griot and his wife. They didn't want to stay any longer in this village of lies and injustice. The next morning they left Santhiu. Together they accompanied Khar with her baby on her journey through the *niaye*.

#### Source

In *White Genesis* (1965, part of the book *The Money-Order*) the Senegalese author Ousmane Sembène describes the downfall of a village.

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### 125. Northern Uganda – 1966

## **Come back to your own Acoli people**

“What happened to Ocol, my husband?” sighed Lawino. He has always been an excellent man, a real 'son of a Chief'. But now he seems to be a witch. He belittles his own ancestors, his parents, and all who is black. Even the lullaby that an Acoli girl sings for her little brother on her back he calls 'noise.'

Ocol finds everything wrong with me. He says I am stupid because I didn't go to a nuns' school and cannot read and write. Because I cannot read the clock and cook at a stove. But I look to the sun to see what time it is and I can cook delightfully at the fireplace.

Ocol thinks that I am superstitious because I am afraid of the kite and use the medicines which I learned about from my mother. Like the roots of the *bomo* against stomach ache and sprouts of *lapena* for a sore throat.

Ocol, why do you scorn me? I am 'the daughter of the Bull!' I am a genuine Acoli, not a slave girl. I was the 'chief of girls' of my age group. How proud you was of me previously. Not so long ago you liked to sit near me, close against me, and I played the bow harp and sang your praise.

Ocol, my husband, my friend, what has happened to you? Is it because you have been in the land of the whites? Because your head is now full of books? Because you fight for a high position in the new 'Democratic Party'?

Dear Ocol, perhaps you don't know, but you have become a beggar, a dog of the white men. Come, let me pour rhino-horn powder in your eyes to remove the crusts, and the pus. Throw away your black glasses and look around you. Come, I will pick the gum out of your ears so that you can hear again. Come back to your own Acoli people, to whom you belong.

#### Source

In *Song of Lawino* (1966) the Ugandan author Okot p'Bitek presents the bitter complaint of a proud

village woman who cannot accept the 'modernization' at all.

Part 2: Progress - Northern Uganda – 1970 (2), story 130.

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## 126. Gaomi District, Shandong Province, China – 1967 (1)

### Aunty is a goddess

When Trotty Wan was ten years old, his father Liufu Wan had told him the story of Aunt Heart Wan. “When you were born, *Gugu* (aunty) had just arrived in our district. She was a new style midwife; she had received a real education. It was 1953, only a few years after the revolution. At the time, most women in our village didn't trust her. They preferred the old midwives. But Heart Wan, your *Gugu* was my brother's daughter, so we asked her to help with your delivery.”

Once *Gugu* had successfully delivered a few children under difficult circumstances, the villagers began to gain confidence in her ability. According to Liufu Wan, “Some traditional midwives were very capable and careful, but others didn't have any idea about the female body. They performed the strangest rituals and pulled the babies forcefully out at the wrong moment. Their incompetence cost the lives of many little ones and their mothers.”

Because of Heart Wan's unrestrained energy and her unbridled commitment, wonderful stories soon started circulating. For example, some told how fast she could cycle describing it as if she had wings. Because Heart Wan knew how to put the new mothers at ease, the births almost always went well. In return, she only asked for a tiny consideration. In no time, the villagers worshipped her. Everyone called her '*Gugu*' whether they were family or not. She earned the status of a *bodhisattva*, a goddess.

At the time of the Cultural Revolution, Trotty was fourteen years old. The District Revolutionary Committee convened a 'struggle meeting'. Thousands of villagers came to watch the spectacle. From many surrounding villages, 'counter-revolutionaries' or 'capitalists' were summoned and brought to the stage. Red flags waved, banners with slogans hung, and rallying-cries echoed from loudspeakers.

*Gugu* was one of the 'culprits' because she'd had a relationship with a jet-fighter pilot who had joined the Nationalists in Taiwan. All 'counter-revolutionaries' bowed deeply in the dust, apologized, and confessed to anything of which they were accused. But not *Gugu*! Although she was forced to sit on her knees, she didn't bow. Every time that she was thumped on the back and pressed to the ground, she came up proudly. She confessed to nothing. But when a Red Guard, still only a girl, put a tattered shoe with a rope around her neck, she ripped it off and threw it to the ground. She could bear being called a 'spy', a 'counter-revolutionary', a 'capitalist' or a 'bourgeois', but denouncing her as a 'tattered shoe', a whore, was too much for her.

The Red Guard tried to pull *Gugu* to her knees by her hair, but *Gugu* shook her head with such anger that the girl fell backwards leaving two bunches of hair in her hands. *Gugu*'s head began to bleed, and blood spilled down her face. The Red Guard left the stage in tears. Dead silence overcame the crowd. To bring back the mood, the Chairman of the Revolutionary Committee began shouting the slogans again, but the crowd barely reacted. One by one, the villagers stood up and walked away silently.

## Source

The novel *Frog* (2009) is written by the Chinese writer Mo Yan who tells about the peasants resisting the birth control policy of the Chinese government. The second part of the book shows how easily the new rich in the 1990s could circumvent the rules.

Part 2: First a goddess, now a demon - Gaomi District, Shandong Province, China – 1970 (2), story 128.

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## **127. A village in Western Africa – 1968**

### **The secret agreement**

It would be an exciting village meeting! All villagers from Togobala and its surrounding areas were rejoicing. It was the dull season of the *Harmattan*, the cold and dry winter wind when there was not much to do on the land.

Half of the villagers had gathered at Fama's place, the last descendant of the glorious, noble Doumbaya family. Recently, Fama had returned from the capital when the last tribal king had passed away. Because Fama was the last Doumbaya, it went without saying that he would become the new king.

The other half had gathered at the huts of the village committee. Since independence, the tribal leaders were abolished. Now, the villages were governed by village committees of the socialist party. For days, the local chairman Babou had fulminated against the 'contra-revolutionaries' and 'reactionaries'. They would make it very clear to Fama that the old times were over. No longer would the king and other rich farmers run the villages.

At Fama's place, everybody thought that the revolutionaries were rough slave sons who didn't know their place. They thought that independence and the revolution had brought nothing but more taxes and brazen contempt for the old customs.

On the agreed afternoon, Babou and his supporters came to the huts of Fama and his family because village meetings were traditionally held at the Doumbaya's place. To everyone's surprise, Babou only spoke words of reconciliation. He spoke of the heroism of Fama during the time of colonization and about the humanity and gentleness to which a real Muslim is obliged. He went on in this respectful manner.

Later on, he made some bold references to contra-revolutionaries for whom there was no longer any place for them. He threw sharp glances to the public to give some excitement to his speech.

The representative of the sub-prefect, who had come all the way from the district capital, became extremely irritated. "Such a worthless village committee," he grumbled to himself. It became too much for him to bear. "The only things I have to deal with are the rules and nothing more," he shouted. "And the rules are that Fama must get on his knees in front of me and swear to an open Koran loyalty to the socialist republic. He must swear that he will never publicly or privately express any negative opinions against the government."



Diamourou, the village storyteller and the eloquent spokesman of Fama, jumped up and shouted, "That is against the agreement!"

On the evening before the village meeting, the old men of Togobala had in utmost secrecy called for Fama and Babou in the graveyard. In the presence of all the ghosts of their ancestors, they told them how anxious they were that the village would fall apart. It was agreed that Fama would maintain the traditional function of tribal king and that Babou would stay chairman of the village committee. Fama would become a member of this committee.

"Our tribal king Fama will become member of the village committee. That is the best thing to do," shouted Diamourou to the great surprise of the representative of the sub-prefect. All the villagers knelt on the floor, and together they said the prayer of thanksgiving. The representative of the sub-prefect had to accept the solution. The meeting was finished.

#### Source

In his book *The Suns of Independence* (1968), the Ivorian author Ahmadou Kourouma describes the fall of a Western African tribal leader. In a few passages, he tells about the life of poor peasants. Kourouma writes very vividly and doesn't mince his words.

\* \* \*

### **128. Gaomi District, Shandong Province, China – 1970 (2)**

#### **First a goddess, now a demon**

"Foot Bai, come out immediately," *Gugu* (aunty) shouted into the megaphone. "Don't be so childish. It is only a minor surgery. Chairman Mao has ordered us to limit the number of new children. If we don't, there will soon be a shortage of food and clothes for all the Chinese people, and schools will become overcrowded." *Gugu* was the chair of the population committee. She, along with two police officers, a few civil guards, and the chair of the women's committee, had gone to the farm of the Bai family to arrest Foot and bring him to the clinic for vasectomy.

Liver Bai, the eldest son of Foot who was at war with his father, was standing in front of the little farm. With his eyes and mouth he pointed to the pigsty. *Gugu* immediately walked over to it, opened the door and shouted, "Come out Foot Bai or I will drag you out of here by your ears." With cobwebs on his head and a shovel in hand, he emerged from the pigsty. "I will smash in the skull of anyone who touches me," he shouted. "Come on, big guy, so afraid of such a small cut," responded the chair of the women's committee. Foot Bai turned around furiously to face her. The two guards used this opportunity and jumped on him. A moment later, his wrists were bound.

Not even a year later, the next phase of the population policy commenced. Immediately after women gave birth, *Gugu*, the midwife, inserted an IUD to prevent future pregnancy. Removing it was considered illegal. Any woman who became pregnant again had to undergo an abortion. *Gugu* arrested the pregnant women who did not come voluntarily to the abortion clinic. When women managed to escape her arrest, she chased them fanatically. As the people in Gaomi said: "First *Gugu* was a goddess; now she is a demon."

### Source

The novel *Frog* (2009) is written by the Chinese writer Mo Yan who tells about the peasants resisting the birth control policy of the Chinese government. The second part of the book shows how easily the new rich in the 1990s could circumvent the rules.

Part 1: Auntie is a goddess - Gaomi District, Shandong Province, China – 1967 (1), story 126.

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## **129. Bihar, India – 1970**

### **The investigation team**

“Dear uncle Bono, finally we are together again,” say the fingers of Douloti, “let the other ones chat, we are together.” Silently, she massages the feet of Bono with such loving attention that her fingers transfer her feelings perfectly. “You are the only one who really can understand what I have suffered. Let the other ones chat.”

- *The government in Delhi needs to take measures by now to abolish debt slavery. Our investigation, our report will compel them to enforce it. Finally, there will be a good law.*
- *How long will it take, before the new law will be in place? And who will respect that law?*
- *First we need a good law, and then we will found an organisation of debt slave prostitutes. With that organisation we will mobilize the public opinion in order to force the government to uphold the law.*
- *In my opinion we should set all the brothels we see on fire. Then we are done with it.*

Douloti belongs to the Nagesia people. Her parents never wanted to sell her, but they were forced to. They couldn't prevent it. She is taken away to the city and ends up in a brothel, where she has already spent a few years as a *kamiya*, a debt slave prostitute.

Uncle Bono is from the same village. He also was a debt slave, but he ran away. He has become the jeep driver of the team that is documenting debt slavery. That is how he has arrived at the brothel where Douloti works.

Douloti massages the feet of Bono silently, and her fingers say: “Do you remember, uncle Bono, how I always was swinging in the aerial roots of the banyan tree of our village, when I was looking after the goats? Do you remember that time that I couldn't go to the festival in another village, because I had an ulcer on my leg? You took me there on your shoulders. Sometimes we heard you making a lot of noise in the night. You were beating your cooking pots to drive away a tiger. Do you remember, uncle Bono? Do you realize how much you mean to me? You are the only one who can understand me.”

### Source

The book *Imaginary Maps* from the Indian author Mahasweta Devi portrays in three impressive stories the bitter life of the indigenous peoples of India.

\* \* \*

## 130. Northern Uganda – 1970 (2)

### Progress

“Away with the old villages! We will destroy all stuffy, stinking, unhealthy huts. We will burn down all old villages.” Ocol worked himself up, like he had to address a crowd, and had to stir them up to put an end to all backward African customs.

Exploitation of women and slaves must stop. Also cattle theft, initiation rites, subservience, superstition, and healing rituals where ill children die right before your eyes. Glorifying tribal wars of olden days has to come to an end.

So much poverty is still there. Let villagers do something against it themselves, let them roll up their sleeves instead of blaming 'the politicians' that nothing is happening. Who ever said that in the morning after gaining independence gold as dew-drops would lay on the grass? That the *olam* trees would rustle of banknotes?

He himself is a politician, and he has certainly become a bit richer. That is right. He has a nice house now in the city with a big garden and a Mercedes. So what?! Didn't he fight for *Uhuru*, for independence? Didn't he ask the minister to build schools in the villages?

By the way, he is still a 'farmer'. He has a big farm in the countryside. Every weekend he goes there. It is delightful to be in the fresh country air and to smell the fragrant earth. He isn't ashamed of it. He has wheat, barley and coffee and a huge flock of sheep. It brings in quite a lot of money. At the same time, he shows the people how to practice agriculture in the profitable, modern way.

To be fair, the village world as it used to be has gone. In fact, there are only two alternatives: you move to the city or you hang yourself. It might sound crude but that is how progress is.

#### Source

In *Song of Ocol* (1970) of the Ugandan author Okot p'Bitek, an African member of the new elite reacts on the complaints of poor villagers.

Part 1: Come back to your own Acoli people - Northern Uganda – 1966 (1), story 125.

\* \* \*

## 131. A bush in Australia – 1971 – *film*

### A lizard on my arm

What a pity that I can't understand them. I can't even pronounce their names. How did they end up out here in the bush? They can't explain it to me. But it doesn't really matter. That little white boy is funny. He finds awesome everything I do. And that girl, well, she is really something. I think she likes me. Sometimes I think ... No, I should not think about it. I will bring them to the big road, and there they will find a truck. Then, they go back to their world, and I will stay here in my world.

But what if? ... I am nearly a man. I am doing my 'great-journey-alone': alone I travel through the bush, I know where I can find water, I know how to make a fire, how to kill an animal and prepare it to eat. I know the land, I know the animals, I can talk with the spirits of our ancestors, and ask them for help. Why should I *not* marry that girl? She seems to be about my age. Perhaps, I should perform the nuptial dance for her after all? I am sure she will understand it ...

How lucky that that black boy found us! Otherwise we would have died of thirst. That stupid accident with our car. Imagine, in the middle of the bush. I was alone with my little brother. We had nothing to eat, during the night it was freezing cold, we had no water. Then, that boy found us. He is funny. He sings beautifully, though I don't understand a single word of it. He can run fast, and kill a kangaroo with his spear. He always knows where to find berries or other fruits. My little brother worships him. He mimics everything he does. He even can speak a little with him.

Actually, it is wonderful to be here. Thanks to that black boy, whose name I can't pronounce. He has painted a beautiful lizard on my arm, and a cockatoo on the back of my little brother. But still I am longing to get back to Sydney. Why? I don't know ...

#### Source

The poignant movie *Walkabout* (1971) from the English director Nicolas Roeg shows something of the life of a young Aboriginal hunter.

\* \* \*

### **132. A nature reserve in Wyoming, US – 1973 – *film***

#### **Impossible plans**

“Well, Jack, I, uh ... uh ... please, it's just not possible.” As usual, Ennis Del Mar didn't have the words. Ennis is a cowboy, but a modern-day version of it. Besides driving cattle on his horse, he does anything that needs to be done on the big ranch where he works. He has a friendly face, wears a beige shirt and a wide-brimmed black cowboy hat. His best friend Jack Twist resembles him, only he speaks more easily. “How is it not possible? We have to get some money and then rent a farm somewhere. We will take some cows and calves, and then we have an income.”

Jack and Ennis first met ten years ago. Together they herded an enormous flock of sheep in the magnificent nature reserve of Brokeback Mountain. They had to keep the sheep together, and at night to kill the coyotes who were attracted by the animals. The shy, introverted Ennis and the talkative, endearing Jack hit it off right away. For them, that summer was one great love affair.

Their cranky boss realised that there was something going on between the two of them, and didn't want to hire them the next year. For four years they had no contact, but then suddenly Jack showed up. How happy Ennis was to see his friend once again, his great love. At once he took a few days off, and together they went to camp at Brokeback Mountain.

The mutual feelings were as before. Now Jack came to visit Ennis every few months to go fishing at Brokeback Mountain. But in the end this was not enough for Jack, he missed Ennis too often, too much. He wanted to live together, on a remote place. He arrived with all sort of ideas. But meanwhile Ennis was married to a kind woman, and he had two daughters who he adored. Besides that, he was

afraid.

“Jack, I have my life, I, uh ... uh ... have my two little girls ... I don't want to lose them. Listen, when I was eleven years old, two older men in our neighbourhood lived together on a farm. They were not wimps, but tough guys, real red-necks ... uh ... One morning, the older one was found dead in a ditch, terribly beaten. My father took me and my little brother there. We had to see what he looked like. It had to be a lesson for us. Do you get that, Jack? You have fine ideas, but ... uh ... it is not possible, simply not possible. Every now and then, we can meet, like we are doing now, and be together for a few days ... and that's it ... do you understand?”

#### Source

*Brokeback Mountain* (2005) from the American director Ang Lee is a beautiful movie about a hopeless relationship.

\* \* \*

### 133. Goiás, Brazil– 1974

#### **'It was never *my* dream'**

He is sitting there with a sombre look on his face. His two sons Mirosmar and Emival are gone. Will they ever come back? "What has become of our dreams, Helena?" he asks. "It was never *my* dream, Francisco," his wife answers softly.

"Mirosmar and Emival had to become a singing duo whether they liked it or not," Helena contemplates bitterly, "because Francisco had this idea in his head." They have sacrificed everything to it. Francisco exchanged almost a whole harvest for a guitar and an accordion without giving any thought to paying the rent. "We'll see," he said and so they lost their land and beautiful farm. They were then driven out of their own village. "So what? The land was not from us," Francisco had said. "Believe me. For the boys, the future is in the city, not here."

The city was terrible. They lived in a shack in a slum. The city was dirty. They had to work hard and earned little. The children were hungry and couldn't go to school. When Mirosmar and Emival started singing in the railway station, they brought in some money and managed to carry on.

A man had introduced himself as a publicity manager. He promised to make the boys famous. He wanted to take the boys with him to make their appearances on stage and bring them to radio stations. After a week, he would bring them home. Helena didn't trust the man, but Francisco insisted that the boys should go with him. "This is their chance!" he had shouted angrily. Now, months had passed, and there had been no word or sign from them.

How does Helena miss Mirosmar and Emival! And how does she miss their farm! Will they ever return to their village? To the birds who are singing early morning, the clear water, the fresh vegetables from their own kitchen garden, and the sun set behind the fields?

Francisco goes looking for the boys. With a picture of them in his hand, he travels from city to city, from one radio station to another.

### Source

In the movie *Two Sons of Francisco* (2005), the Brazilian film-maker Breno Silveira tells the story of a peasant family moving to the city. In the end, the two sons become famous singers but at a great cost.

\* \* \*

## 134. French Alps – 1975

### **From another world**

Marcel is sitting in his cell with his hands over each other. He has been sentenced to two years in prison. It is hard to understand how it has happened. The apple harvest was splendid this year. They had gotten about fifty bags of apples, enough for three thousand litres of cider. On that November day, Marcel had put twelve bags of *marc*, heavy fermented draff, on the cart, and he had brought it to the village.

It was snowing. Just like every year, the mobile distillery was standing in front of the church to make *gnôle*, apple brandy from the *marc*. Everyone was excited! The other peasants also had a nice harvest: plentiful apples, cider, *marc* and now very much *gnôle*. They agreed that Marcel would get more than one hundred litres for sure.

Out of the blue, two tax inspectors had turned up. Mostly, the village was phoned in time by a neighbouring village that they had spotted the inspectors' car. Everyone kept an eye on it. But just that day the telephone had not worked properly, and there was no time to quickly hide some bottles of *gnôle*.

'You know what that means,' the chief inspector had said to Marcel, 'when you have more than twenty litres apple brandy, you have to pay excise tax for the rest.' Marcel knew it quite well. Tonelessly he said: 'That means that I have to pay for what I produced myself.' He had to pay more than two hundred thousand francs, about half the price of a good workhorse.

When he was driving back home, he could no longer think carefully, but he knew exactly what to do. He would teach the inspectors a lesson that they would never forget.

At the farm, he put on warm boots, a long overcoat, and a cap. He took his shotgun out of the cupboard and put it under his coat. Along the side of the road, he waited for the inspectors. When he saw their car approaching, he went to the middle of the road and waved his arms. The car stopped; the chief inspector turned down his window and asked what was happening. He looked into the barrels of the shotgun.

For two days Marcel had locked up the inspectors in a *grenier*, a small grain barn at a remote, abandoned farm. Then, he had released them. They had been deadly afraid. He had tried to explain to them what was upsetting him: the injustice. But they had not understood his anger. Nothing! They came from another world.

### Source

The book *Pig Earth* (1979) of the English writer John Berger contains a series of short stories about the peasant life in the small French mountain village where Berger has lived since the middle of the seventies.

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### 135. Anatolia and Ankara, Turkey – 1978

#### **A flock of sheep in the capital**

There are so many people, cars, and buses! The streets reek, and the noise is unbearable. The city is full of high buildings and statues. Shop windows are stuffed with expensive home goods and precious clothes. Although it was not the first time that Sivan visited Ankara, he continues to be shocked by its filthy extravagance every time.

Sivan is a young herdsman and nomad from Anatolia. He is travelling with his father and two brothers to bring their herd of 370 sheep to Ankara by train. They had reserved four cattle cars to make the trip.

When they led their flock from the train station to the cattle market across the busy traffic, well-dressed people look at them in surprise and amazement. Some appear amused while others irritated by the traffic jam they cause.

Finally, when the flock has arrived at the market, Sivan sits down in a corner to take some rest. So many thoughts tumble through his head. What should he do? The city life doesn't attract him, but the nomadic life is a blind alley. Sheep rearing is no longer profitable. With more mountain meadows being ploughed by tractors to grow grain, they have less space for grazing their flocks of sheep.

His father is struggling to accept the decline of the nomadic life and the pride it brought to the Veysikan family. He frequently erupts in anger, shouting, hitting, and kicking violently. He has become unbearable to be around.

In the evening Sivan goes to see an old friend in Ankara who is a guard now at a building under construction and hopes to become the gatekeeper when the building is ready. "Life is hard in the city," says the friend, "here the rich are really rich, and the poor really poor." His son is a communist and talks about 'workers', 'bourgeois' and 'capitalists'.

In the night Sivan cannot get to sleep. So many thoughts race through his mind. Nomadic life is a blind alley. His father behaves terribly. In Ankara he could become a construction worker. He is strong enough for it, but how awfully he will miss his family, the outdoor life with the sheep and the independence. Thinking that he will return with the train from time to time to see his mother and the others and to breath fresh air, he restlessly falls asleep.

#### Source

The movie *The Herd* (1978) of the Turkish film-maker Yılmaz Güney shows the contrasts between nomadic and city life. The movie also tells about a bloody feud between two nomad families, and about everlasting love.

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### 136. Şanlıurfa Province, South-eastern Turkey – 1980

#### **Soldiers at the border**

"You almost cannot believe how charming our village looks. There, you find delightful orchards and golden wheat fields. A path meanders through the meadows to the pine forest. It smells like thyme and myrrh. In the background, you can see the mountains with their big boulders."

Kenan is blinking his eyes when he tells about his village; it's like he is dreaming. "You should come at least once," he tells his friend Ziya. "It is a promise," Ziya answers. He knows the story of Kenan by heart, but he still loves to dream with him.

Kenan and Ziya are recruits in the Turkish army. They are stationed in Eastern Turkey. They have to guard the border with Syria to stop the smugglers. Every night, Kenan has to go to one of the foxholes, where he keeps watch with his friend. There are many fleas, and it is so cold and humid there that all the boys get rheumatism in their knees.

In front of them stretches a minefield. Behind it runs the border. When they see something move in the dark, they have to shoot it. Then, they hear horses neigh, seized by panic, and throw off their packs. The smugglers shoot back. A shoot-out can last fifteen to twenty minutes. When the firing ceases, they carefully go to take a look. Then, they see a dying horse with two bags of tea next to him and one or two killed smugglers with black traditional trousers.

Parallel to the border runs a 'security road.' Here, the commander drives his jeep at irregular times to check that no soldier is sleeping or chatting secretly with other soldiers by the field-phone. When he sees something he doesn't like, he releases his rage.

Sometimes, a soldier is hit by the fire of the smugglers. He is then rushed to a hospital. From time to time, a soldier is even killed. Other soldiers become crazy.

During the day, the soldiers sleep. A few hours before his duty starts, Kenan gets up and goes to his friend Ziya. Ziya's situation is a little better than Kenan's. Just like the other soldiers, he comes from a village, but he is the son of a schoolteacher which meant that he learned to type. As a result, he became the 'clerk' in the camp. He types the letters of the commander and writes reports when there has been a shoot-out.

Just like all soldiers, Ziya misses his village. He loves to listen to Kenan telling how smoke crinkles up from the chimneys of the farms, how the village smells of fresh farm bread, and how the birds sing lustfully. Together, they will struggle through these terrible years.

#### Source

In the book *Reckless* (2013), the Turkish author Hasan Ali Toptaş tells the story of peasant boys who have to perform military service in miserable conditions.

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### **137. Gaomi District, Shandong Province, China – 1985**

#### **'Take me back'**

With a friendly, but also a bit mocking smile the ghost of my grandmother looks at me. I sit on my knees before her burial mound. I make three low bows with my head flat to the earth, and I smell the fresh fragrance of the grass and the yellow flowers which stay on her grave.



“What do you see, my grandson?” asks grandmother, holding a brass mirror up to me. “Well, do you see a tame rabbit, or not?” She laughs merrily, chuckling musically. When I look in the brass mirror, I see indeed two red eyes, like tame rabbits have: clever and cunning. Eyes, just like I see too often around me in the city: shrewd, sanctimonious, and greedy.

“My grandson, come back to where you belong,” grandmother pleads. Her eyes look hopefully at me. How beautiful she is, even more beautiful and younger than I had imagined. “But first you must have a good wash in the river. You have to soak there for three days. Your urban body odour is unbearable.” I know it, I am as weak-willed, as sanctimonious, as self-satisfied as all the other people in the city where I live.

Then I see also the ghosts of my father and grandfather. They look at me sadly and longingly. “Take me back,” I sob out. “Take me back, North-east Gaomi!” North-east Gaomi, region of heroes and bandits, of the blood-red, proud, more than man-sized sorghum, of endless sorghum fields, vast as the sea, with that bittersweet fragrance, floating through the red evening sky. “Take me back!”

### Source

The book *Red Sorghum* (1986) from the Chinese writer Mo Yan tells the story of the bitter fight against the Japanese occupiers in a remote peasant region. The struggle between the Kuomintang, the communists and the local gangs of bandits is no less violent.

Part 1: Crab hunt - Gaomi District, Shandong Province, China – 1934 (1), story 86.

Part 2: The fox ghost - Gaomi District, Shandong Province, China – 1937 (2), story 93.

\* \* \*

## **138. Burkina Faso – 1986 – *film***

### **'Don't worry'**

“Oh, Issa, what kind of man are you, anyway? It's going to be all right, but just have a little patience. Mother and I are helping you, and Father surely will come around. You know how he is, he cannot remain angry for long.” Ashamed, the strapping young man in his plain shirt bows his head. After a little while he looks warmly at the pretty, thin-faced woman. “You are right, Bentu,” he says softly, “I will hide here in the bushes.” “Promise me that you will not run away,” she says earnestly, only to laugh heartily a moment later, when she sees how contrite her friend looks. Relieved, he takes a deep breath. That's how he knows Bentu, cheerful, like always.

After a long, difficult time, the parents of Bentu decided to leave the village where their families had lived for generations. It was quite a big step, but there was no other possibility. It had been bone-dry there during the last several years. Nothing would grow there any more. Bentu had to walk so far every day to fetch water. Once a month a big government truck came to bring rice. That was not a way to live. One day, just after the distribution of the food, the family loaded some goods on their old donkey cart, and left the village.

Issa, Bentu's friend, soon followed after the family, and was received warmly. A strong worker was more than welcome. In a nearby town, Bentu's father sold the cart and the donkey, and with that money they were driven away in a pick-up truck to the west as far as possible. After that, they walked and walked until they arrived in a green region, where they settled down. They built some simple huts, and

started cultivating the land. There was enough rain, and after a few months the maize had grown up beautifully.

“Put your hand on my belly,” Bentu softly says to Issa, and again she has to laugh. “Father was so angry when he found out that I was pregnant, that he drove you away. But I will bring you some rice from time to time, and you can catch fish in the river. Mother is very fond of you. She will work around Father. Don't worry.”

#### Source

*Yam Daboo* (1986) from the Burkinabé film-maker Idrissa Ouédraogo, depicts beautifully the life of peasants who make a fresh start.

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### **139. Shandong Province, China – 1986**

#### **The garlic rebellion**

Gao Yang is not the type to be a troublemaker or firebrand. On the contrary, he is rather fearful. He is a hard-working peasant, a father who is fond of his little daughter, and a helpful neighbour. He grumbles about the government the same as anyone else. So what is he doing there in the square in front of the regional board office between these shouting peasants with their carts full of garlic?

When Gao Yong couldn't sell his garlic at the cold-storage building, he didn't know what to do. Just like all the other peasants he urgently needed money. When the peasants marched into the city, he went with them. The caravan of garlic carts went to the regional board office.

“Down with the bureaucrats and other parasites,” shouts a peasant. He stays on top of his cart and waves his fist. “Zhong Weimin, come out!” Gao Yang hears himself shout together with the other peasants.

Zhong Weimin, the chairman of the regional board, doesn't show up. Though an old man, a gatekeeper, appears running. He tries to put a heavy chain on the lock of the beautiful decorated wrought iron gate. Furious peasants spit at him and throw bunches of garlic. Quickly, he runs back. “Let these old morons eat the garlic themselves!” shouts the same peasant as he throws one bunch of garlic after another through the gate. Gao Yang wants to run away. Soon it will get out of hand, and the police will arrive. But he is stuck with his cart and old donkey. He cannot move forward or backward. He breaks into a sweat.

Peasants behind him start throwing stones, boards, and paving stones against the gate. Others hit the lock with a pole. Slowly the gate bends and swings open. The peasants behind Gao Yang press him forward. He doesn't want to go inside, but he is taken along. Once inside the region board office, he looks surprised at the expensive carpets, beautiful lamps, and the big paintings. Immense anger begins overpowering him.

They would get fifty fen a pound the region board had promised them last year. The board had enlarged the garlic area. There was a big harvest, and soon the cold-storage buildings were so full they could fit no more garlic. The sales contracts were officially nullified. The peasants had to find out their own way.

With so much supply, the price of the garlic had plummeted immediately. First to twenty fen a pound, and later on to only a meagre three fen. The peasants wanted a solution from the region board. But no one would listen.

Gao Yang stands in a room with a shiny wooden desk. Peasants around him pull the books and folders off the shelves, throwing them with force to the floor. Others pull down the curtains. Gao Yang sees a little pot with a cactus. Still furious about the great luxury before him, he throws it through the window, which shatters into a thousand pieces. Then he picks up a bowl with fine goldfishes and slings it through another window. When he looks out, he sees the fishes squirming for breath on the paving stones outside. That soberes him.

When Gao Yang glances toward the broken gate, he sees police officers arrive in bright, white shirts with clubs in their hands. He wants to run away.

#### Source

The Chinese author Mo Yan portrays in his novel *The Garlic Ballads* (1988) the peasants' life. Since the Cultural Revolution their lives have improved, but there is still a lot of poverty in the villages and corruption is rampant.

The book also tells the story of a tragic love affair and of a blind singer who is not afraid to criticize the government.

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### **140. A village in Burkina Faso – 1989 – film**

#### **Sana, a witch?**

They are inseparable, Bila and his cousin Nopoko, both about ten years old. But now Nopoko is ill, gravely ill. Her mother at first thought that it was a bout of malaria, but now it appears to be more serious. The men ask a sorcerer for his help. He requests an absurdly large sacrifice. But even that doesn't seem to work. Everyone is desperate. Village life is at a standstill. Everyone expects Nopoko to die soon.

Bila has to do something, to save his best playmate. He cannot imagine a life without her. But what can he do, when the adults are helpless? The only thing he can think of is seeking out Sana for help. Sana is a very old woman, an outcast. She lives outside the village in an isolated hut, and everyone calls her a 'witch'. But why? Bila doesn't understand it. Sana is kind. A while back, Sana joked with him, when he was playing hide and seek with Nopoko in the bush. Ever since then, they are friends. Bila calls her *Yaaba*, grandmother. Sana is delighted with that. "You are the first one who calls me *Yaaba*."

When the adults aren't paying attention, Bila slips away and runs through the bush to the hut of Sana. "Yaaba, Yaaba, Nopoko is dying. Please, help her!" "I can't," Sana answers, "I don't have magic power." Tears come into Bila's eyes. Usually he would quickly wipe them away, but now he doesn't care.

A moment later the old woman puts on a warm shawl, and pours water in a big calabash. "I will help you," she says softly. Then she is on her way. Bila follows her with his eyes. Far away, at the riverside, he sees her getting into the row-boat of the ferryman. Where's *Yaaba* going? Is she going to look for

herbs, or does she perhaps know a good healer? At least she is helping him, and trying to save Nopoko, while in fact the other adults already have given up on her. Now, Bila knows for sure that Sana is not at all a witch, but a real grandmother.

#### Source

In his beautiful movie *Yaaba* (1989) Idrissa Ouédraogo, director from Burkina Faso, portrays the life in a remote savannah village frozen in time.

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### **141. A small village in Vietnam – 1989 (2)**

## **Mayor Duong**

“So, how is mayor Duong now?” Hàng finally asks the peasant who is sitting next to her. “Well, my girl, he has left for Hell,” he answers loudly. Then all the men start laughing hard, and all the women poke each other with the elbows in their sides and giggle. Hàng is a pale and a bit skinny girl with vivid bright eyes. She lives in Hanoi, but she is now visiting her aunt Tâm in the village where her mother had previously lived. Aunt Tâm is so fond of her that she from time to time sends a nephew with a Honda to Hanoi to pick her up for some festivity or another.

Last time she was here everyone was talking about 'that pig Duong' who tried to take away the orchard from Mrs. Hai. She was a poor woman, who was on her own. Her son had been killed in the war, and her husband had also passed away. She lived from her orchard. The mayor had put his mind on her piece of land to build a house on it for his newly married daughter. Hàng had often recalled this story, and wondered how it had ended up.

In the kitchen Hàng meets Mrs. Dua, her aunt's servant. She is busy with all different kinds of dishes for the guests, but she still finds some time to tell the story of Mrs. Hai. “That pig, Duong did indeed manage to usurp the land of Mrs. Hai. He had bribed all the officials who are in charge of land acquisition. Everyone in the village was angry, but we couldn't do anything. Duong is a member of the Communist Party, and being a villager, as a peasant you are powerless.”

Mrs. Dua stokes up the fire, stirs several pots, takes a deep breath, and continues her story. “Mrs. Hai wandered the village with big dark circles under her eyes. At night she often slept in the cemetery, near the grave of her son. One evening she saw that the gate of that pig was accidentally not locked. Like a ghost she sneaked inside and saw that that Duong was feeding his newborn puppies mush. Under her dress she carried a sledgehammer. With it she hit him on the back of his head as hard as she could. He died in a single stroke. Then she ran to her hut, sprinkled kerosene everywhere, and hung herself, after setting her hut on fire. We all tried to put out the fire, but it was already too late, Mrs. Hai was dead.”

Mrs. Dua carries on with cooking; in the living room the party goes on merrily. But Hàng is overwhelmed, she is totally numb, empty.

#### Source

The novel *Paradise of the Blind* (1988) written by the Vietnamese author Duong Thu Huong tells about a poor girl, growing up in Hanoi. From her mother she hears stories about the small village where she

came from.

Part 1: Class analysis - a small village in Vietnam – 1955 (1), story 116.

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## 142. A village in Burkina Faso – 1990

### Saga is still alive!

Nogma is tied to a pole in the centre of the village. She could cry, but she refuses to shed one tear. A young man walks up to her and cuts the ropes. She is free again. “You killed Saga,” she says. “I feel sorry for you,” he answers without expression. The village elders had decided in the interest of the entire village, and their decision is final.

A few weeks ago Saga had returned to the village after two years of absence. How happy Nogma was! But she was not allowed to show it. She had been married off to an old man while he was away. That old man was the father of Saga. Her family and Saga’s had decided so, but Saga still remained her great love.

Saga had become furious when he heard that Nogma was married to his father. When Saga left he had put his hand on his heart and had promised Nogma to come back to marry her. “It was impossible to avoid it, Saga. They forced me against my will into the marriage,” Nogma said looking at Saga with big, wet eyes. “I still love you and no one else.” “And I love you,” Saga answered. Both smiled greatly relieved that their mutual love was still alive.

For a few weeks, they met each other secretly. These were wonderful hours that they spent together, but their rendezvous soon became known publicly. The village elders decided that Saga had to be killed by a young man of the village. Saga’s brother Kougri was assigned by lot to perform the act.

One night, Kougri and a few other men went with torches to the straw hut that Saga had built for himself outside the village. He snuck inside and stabbed his knife into the foot of the bed. Saga awoke startled, but Kougri forced his hand over Saga’s mouth. He whispered an explanation to his brother and made a hole in the back side of the hut for Saga to escape. He wounded himself with the knife. He could not kill his brother even when the customs of the village demanded it.

Kougri then came out of the hut staggering and bleeding. He said: “That dirty dog attacked me. Set his hut on fire!” In the village, he showed his bloody knife to the old men. They nodded in approval. The village honour was saved.

The next morning when everyone was working, the mother of Saga visited Nogma. Her son Kougri walked behind her. “Tell her,” she said. “I didn’t kill Saga,” said Kougri simply. Nogma felt that she could dance of happiness although she could not show her joy. She would not show it to anybody. Soon she would look for Saga, and she would find him.

#### Source

The movie *Tilai* (The Law – 1990) from the film-maker Idrissa Ouédraogo from Burkina Faso beautifully paints the atmosphere of a remote village in the savannah. The traditional village laws are gradually called into question.

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### 143. A village in Burkina Faso – 1990

#### Rolling in money

“I never want to see him again,” Saratou had said quietly right after giving birth. Samba, her husband, had run away into the bushes when she was brought by a truck to the city to deliver their child. What sort of caring husband would act like that! He had said to Binta, one of the neighbours in the truck, “I don't go to the city. No, I won't give an explanation.” Then, he took off. His friend Salif had run after him, shouting, “You idiot, come back!” But Samba was already out of sight.

The delivery had gone well. Saratou now had a healthy boy. Everyone should have been happy, but the atmosphere was tainted by Samba's departure. What was going on with Samba? Saratou had already been worried about him. He had come back after working for some time in the city. He appeared to be rolling in money. Samba threw around his money, buying a whole cattle herd for the village and paying to construct a village pub. He purchased a bicycle as readily as someone else might buy a t-shirt.

How did Samba acquire so much money? Of course Saratou had asked him. “I worked at a banana plantation,” he had said. “If that were true, everyone here would be rich,” she had answered. This response had made Samba defensive. “I love you. Isn't that enough? Never ask me questions about my wealth!” he barked.

Today, a jeep with three policemen arrived in the village to arrest Samba. Salif ran to Samba to tell him to flee. They ran away together with the three policemen at their heels. One of the policemen shot Salif in his leg, and Samba stopped to help his friend. This allowed the policemen to arrest him.

Samba had robbed a gas station. During the robbery, his accomplice was killed, but Samba had fled with the money. In fact he is happy that he is finally caught. Every night when he tries to sleep, he pictures his dead friend lying before him. His own wife distrusts him and his father looks anxiously at him. Rather than welcoming him back into his household.

Upon arrest, two policemen bring Samba to their jeep in handcuffs. With tears and regret in his eyes, he looks at Saratou, who was standing there with their baby boy at her hip. “I will wait for you,” she says.

#### Source

The movie *Samba Traoré* (1992) from film-maker Idrissa Ouédraogo from Burkina Faso shows the unity and vibrancy of a small, remote village in the savannah. Sometimes, villagers go to the city for a while to earn money and then come back out of hardship.

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### 144. Bihar, India – 1992

#### Hunting festival

Mary hacks away with her blade at the contractor who lay at the ground. At the first blow he still looks

at her with wide terrified eyes, but then his head sinks away. Mary takes his wallet, puts the big pile of banknotes into a corner of her sari and ties it up well. She has blood on her arms and also on her sari. She will wash it out at the nearby stream. She drags the dead body to the edge of the ravine a few meters away, and pushes it down. It tumbles into the endless depths. Tonight the leopard and other animals will feast upon it. Or not. She doesn't care.

For months the contractor had troubled Mary. He had come in the area of the Oraon people for cutting big trees and selling them at a huge profit to timber companies. Strong villagers, men and women, did the heavy work, for low daily wages. When his eye fell on the young and slender Mary, immediately he was lost. He had to get her, although she was already engaged.

Time and time again he tried to have a chat with her, or he brought a present. Mary didn't like it at all, replied to every remark with an insult, and accepted no present. She threatened to cut off his nose, if he should even so much as touch her. Her rude remarks made Mary still more attractive in the eyes of the contractor. He had to get her soon, because the cutting of the trees was almost over.

Some time later the contractor had waylaid Mary on a small forest path and caught her from behind. She had great difficulty in freeing herself, and then, when she looked at him, she saw the animal within him. "Soon there will be the hunting festival of our village," flashed through her, "and this man will be my prey."

"Let us meet at that big rock on the day of the festival," she had said to the contractor with a big smile. "Near the ravine, you know. We will have our own party there." The man was surprised, but at the same time extremely happy. Now, at last, he would get what he wanted!

After cleaning herself thoroughly in the stream and washing away the blood on her sari, Mary walks in a good mood to her village, where the hunting party is in full swing. She drinks, sings, and dances better than anyone else. Late in the night she walks away to the nearby town where the bus station is. Together with her fiancé she will travel to one big city or another to build up a new life.

### Source

The book *Imaginary Maps* from the Indian author Mahasweta Devi portrays in three impressive stories the bitter life of the indigenous peoples of India.

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## **145. A small village in Madhya Pradesh, India – 1993**

### **The mysterious bird**

"Everyone talks about it. The shadow of the great black mysterious bird is seen everywhere, in all the villages of our Nagesia people." Suddenly the face of Shankar Nagesia clouds over. From spellbound and longing, it takes on an expression of deep pain. "Our ancestors are anxious," he murmurs, "they are confused, they are displeased. We didn't protect their graves. We are guilty."

Then, Shankar starts singing the songs of his people, about the mountains and the forests which were once there, about the rivers and the streams, the animals and the plants: Actually we were kings at that time. We had everything, we didn't owe anyone anything. Our ancestors were content. They were blessing our life. Then the intruders came. We withdrew to our forests, higher and higher in our

mountains. But they built roads and caught us nevertheless. First we became their subjects, and later on their slaves. Everyone has debts now, we are almost all debt slaves.

The intruders have built their roads, their houses, their hospitals, and their schools on top of the graves of our ancestors. So they are displeased and confused. Hence they send the mysterious bird, which is hovering above our last forests, our poor huts, our impoverished lives. We only see his shadow, but that is reminding us that once we were kings, that we had everything we needed, a rich and free life with our feasts and sacrificial rituals. We respected our age-old norms and protected the graves of our ancestors.

Our ancestors didn't abandon us. They sent us the mysterious bird. And we have our songs. We don't leave. We stay with the last graves that remain.

#### Source

The book *Imaginary Maps* from the Indian author Mahasweta Devi portrays in three impressive stories the bitter life of the indigenous peoples of India.

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### **146. Village in Anatolia, Turkey – 1995**

#### **The missing girl**

“Just use your head!” the village head cries at the top of his lungs, furiously pulling at his cigarette and puffing out clouds of smoke. “There is only one in the whole village who could do something like this! Who else could have done it?” Nervously the village guard goes in his mind through the streets of the village. He passes by all the doors. He moves again his Mauser rifle, which is resting between his knees. He really doesn't know who could have kidnapped Güvercin.

The day before yesterday, Reşit had come to the village head panting and with big eyes. His cousin Güvercin disappeared for no reason. They had looked for her everywhere and asked everyone. Immediately, the village head had gone to the farm to look. Silently, he walked through all the rooms. He looked behind the bags with wheat and chickpeas. Then, he went to the stable and searched every corner. Not a trace of the girl. “Is Güvercin in love with someone? Or someone with her?” he asked her mother.

He ordered the village guard to go to the mountains with a group of men. They searched till dark with no result.

Since then, Reşit has come at least three times a day to the small office of the village head panting and asking what to do. But he couldn't think of anything until an idea dawned upon him. Cennet's son was the one who could have done it. How that idea had entered his mind he could not explain to anyone.

Cennet's son was a bit crazy. He wandered the mountains for days and said strange things in the village which nobody could understand. Everyone was used to it. The children laughed at him.

“Go and keep an eye on that son of Cennet. Don't lose sight of him for a moment, understood?” The village guard nodded. He hung his Mauser on his shoulder and was sitting on his heels for hours under



a tree in front of the house of Cennet. From time to time, he smoked a cigarette. In the meantime, it had become dark. Cennet's son was sitting behind the window. He was writing in the light of an oil lamp. Suddenly, he heard the whispering voice of the village head beside him. "Come on, we will catch him." Cennet had screamed and cried. Cennet's son had looked with big eyes and hadn't said a word. In the office, the village head and the guard gave him a trashing. Again, he had looked with big, anxious eyes, and later on he had screamed. Cennet, with her white hair peeking out from under her headscarf, had banged on the door. "Let him go, he didn't do anything wrong," she had cried. Finally, the village head had released him.

The village head looked at the blood-stains on the wall of the office. Güvercin had been missing for more than a week now. There was no sign of her. Cennet spat on the ground every time she met him. Cennet's son was roaming the village again after a few days, from time to time laughing horribly and shouting: "Why does snooooow fall doooown?"

It was like the sound came nearer. There was Cennet's son staying at the window of the office. He pressed his nose flat against the window. "Why does snooooow fall doooown?" he shouted. The village head broke into a cold sweat.

### Source

In the book, *The Shadowless* (1995) the Turkish author Hasan Ali Toptaş portrays the life in a small, remote village. Dreams, delusions, memories, rumours, and stories fill the book. And in the meantime, everyday life goes on. The villagers have no choice other than to get along with each other. From the distant government they expect nothing.

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## **147. A village in Zimbabwe – 1996 – film**

### **Foster children**

"Ozias, come and sit with me." The heavysset Ozias very clearly doesn't like this request. He is busy unloading reeds from a cart, but he cannot ignore the urgent plea of the older woman, Ambuya. "Keep an eye on the donkeys," he shouts to his servant, and with a disgruntled face sits down on the ground next to Ambuya. "Ozias, things aren't going well with the children," she begins, "and you are their uncle. Tamari can't manage on her own. I am helping the two youngest ones as well as I can, but I am poor. Tamari's debt to the grocer is growing from week to week. One day it will end badly. You are prosperous, you are the brother of their father. You have to help them out."

Tamari indeed can't manage alone. She is only seventeen. Her parents had died recently. Her brother Itai had gone to the capital, Harare, to earn some money, but since then she hasn't heard a word from him. Tamari takes care of her little sister and brother. That is quite difficult, because there is no money left at home. And most villagers avoid the family, because their parents had AIDS.

"Ozias, I will be direct with you," Ambuya goes on with a serious furrow on her forehead, "you are doing well, you have a healthy wife and three healthy children. I'm really happy for you, but it is your *duty* to assist your family members in need. Just do it!" Ozias gets up slowly, brushes off his clothes, and mumbles, "Yes, yes, I understand, but now I have to get on with my work." Then, he walks away.

### Source

*Everyone's child* (1996) from the Zimbabwean film director Tsitsi Dangarembga is a poignant movie about the difficult life of foster children.

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### **148. A hamlet in Hebei Province, China – 1997 – film**

#### **Not one student less**

“But who are you?” the young woman who is lying on the bed asks. “I am Wei Minzhi, the substitute teacher. Master Gao had to leave, and now I am here temporarily. But, where is your son Zhang Huike? He is not at school, he *has* to go to school. That's mandatory. It is not permitted to be absent.” “He is no longer here,” the mother answers, “he left for the city, to earn money. We have debts, my husband is dead, and I am ill. He is the only one who can help. He went there with a few older kids from the village.”

Wei – long black braided hair, red-cheeked – walks away angrily. “Make sure that there is no student missing when I come back in a month,” teacher Gao had said. “When all are again there, I will arrange for you to get the fifty yuan the mayor promised you. Of the thirty-eight students we had last year, already ten have run off. You know what, when all twenty-eight are again there, I will give you ten yuan extra myself.”

Wei is only thirteen years old, she only completed the six-year primary school, but the mayor couldn't find anyone else. Teacher Gao was not at all happy about it, but he urgently needed to visit his old mother who was gravely ill. He showed Wei everything, gave some instructions, and then left.

Halfway to the school, Wei changes her mind. She doesn't go back to the school, she goes to the mayor! Let the village help the sick mother, then Zhang won't have to work in the city. But the mayor, a middle-aged farmer with a shabby grey suit and a grey cap on his head, doesn't want to hear about it. The village has simply no money for it, and that's the end of it.

At night, when Wei is lying in her bed, she almost wants to cry when she thinks about what happened to her that day. She can forget about that sixty yuan. Then she gets an inspiration. Tomorrow she will go to Zhang's mother, ask her the address in the city where Zhang stays, and pick him up on Sunday. She doesn't have money for the bus ticket, but it doesn't matter, she will hitch-hike. With a faint smile on her face she falls asleep.

### Source

*Not one less* (1999) is a moving film from the Chinese director Zhang Yimou. The actors have their own names and play themselves.

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### **149. A village in the Sahel, Africa – 1999**

## The Baobab

“You really don't know where the people are coming from? You have no idea? Come on, I can't believe that.” The storyteller with his white robe and turban and his small white drum looks around the big circle of children with friendly, challenging eyes. They all sit in the shadow of the village tree, a giant baobab.

“Where are the people coming from?” he repeats. “From a tree,” says a boy shyly. “From the Magic Tree,” a sharp girl's voice shouts. “That's right,” the storyteller affirms. “Long, long ago, the first child of the world crawled out of the Magic Tree, the Omumborombuga.

He was sitting comfortably in the cool shade of the Omumborombuga, but he felt lonely. Sometimes, he got hungry and thirsty. What should he do? He saw all types of trees and bushes, but one tree he liked most. It was an old baobab. He walked to it and tried to embrace the trunk. But it was so thick that his arms could not cover the half of it. The baobab was so moved by the embrace that it quickly produced delicious, juicy fruits for the boy to eat and drink.”

The children listened breathlessly. “Since that time, the boy and the baobab were best friends. When the boy was sick, the baobab helped him with its medicinal leaves. It shared dry branches with him when he felt cold in the evening. It shared big branches when he wanted to build a hut and fibres of bark to make baskets. The boy and the baobab were so happy together.”

“Later on, the boy married and had many children. He became very old and died in the shadow of his beloved baobab. When he died, the leaves rustled a sad farewell song. The spirit of the boy went on living in the baobab and is still living here. All our ancestors are living here. Sometimes you will hear them whisper in the evening when it becomes dark, or you see them vaguely in the early morning fog.”

The children sighed. It was a nice story. “And now I will teach you the baobab song,” continues the storyteller and starts drumming and singing.

### Source

The children's book *De bomen van Afrika – verhalen en legenden uit de Sahel* (1999) of the Italian writer Carla Barbarella gives information about trees from the Sahel and tells old stories.

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## 150. A hamlet in Central Morocco – 1999

### Ayoub

“Oh my love, come back soon.” Aida sings softly a popular song, while she makes pancakes on the gas burner. She has to smile when she realises what she is singing. Of course M'barek will come back soon, where should he go otherwise? He said he would be back within a week, but he has already been gone for two weeks. I'm sure he will come soon.

M'barek, dressed up in his best clothes, had gone to the city to visit his nephew, to ask him for some money. At least, that is what he said. The bank was asking for short-term repayment of a loan. Otherwise, the bank will sell his land, which he had given as collateral. When M'barek obtained the

loan, the bank director had promised him that he could repay it after the harvest. M'barek had signed the contract, although he barely can read. Now he has to repay the loan immediately. Obviously, the bank wants to take away his land.

Ayoub enters the kitchen. He is happy that his mother is smiling. He knows that it is a worrisome time. Aida looks at Ayoub. How he has grown. He already has a small moustache, and some hair on his chin. He does a lot on the farm. He herds the sheep, and draws water. He also talks in a friendly way to grandpa who sits in a corner, mumbling, and he tries his best at reading and writing. Ayoub has Down syndrome. He is afraid to go to school, because the other children make fun of him. Aida has gone to talk to the teacher. He has promised to protect him.

M'barek is often angry with Ayoub. He cannot bear seeing that he is different than the other children. When Aida notices Ayoub examining her, she says: "Daddy will be back soon. I'm sure he has found a solution." Ayoub smiles, reassured. "I am so happy with him," Aida thinks, "he is such a good-natured, lovely boy."

#### Source

The movie *Sweat Rain* (2016), made by the Moroccan director Hakim Belabbes shows the life at a small farm, with its grief, its worries, and its happiness.

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### **151. Gobi Desert, Mongolia – 2003 – film**

## **Reconciliation**

Tonight it is a party night. The family sits together in the *yurt*, the big, beautifully ornamented nomad tent. There is eating, drinking and laughing, but above all, singing, because a musician is visiting them. And that doesn't happen every day. The musician points toward Uгна, a boy about ten years old. With a lot of devotion he sings a desert song. The musician accompanies him skilfully on his *morin khuur*, the traditional two-string violin. A while later, when Odgoo, the young mother of Uгна, hands out big bowls of hot tea and chunks of candy, there is a hush for a moment. Then, grandpa Janchiv addresses the guest a bit ceremonially, "We are so grateful that you came to us, and we are so happy that you managed to reconcile the mother and her calf."

About three weeks ago a little camel was born. It was a difficult, painful delivery, and the camel mother wanted nothing to do with her young one. She didn't allow her to nurse from her. She walked away, snorted, bit and kicked the little one. The young camel bleated in a heart-rending way, but the mother ignored her. Odgoo, her husband, grandpa and grandma, everyone tried anything: soothing and flattering words, different Mongolian prayers and rituals, and tying the mother's hind legs to prevent kicking. But nothing helped. The camel mother had cast off the young one definitively. Since then, Odgoo had milked the big camel and fed it to the small one. It was a sad spectacle, because the young one went on lamenting.

One evening grandpa said that the *Hoosh* ritual was the only thing that perhaps could be a solution. But then, you need a *morin khuur* player, who is not so easily available. For that you have to go all the way

to Aimak town. Dude, the big brother of Uгна, travelled two days on his camel through the desert to Aimak, and begged the music teacher of the cultural centre there to help them. The teacher was very busy, but still promised to come.

One week later, he indeed turned up on a motorbike with his instrument. It took the mother camel some time to get used to the musician and the sound of the *morin khuur*, but then she slowly relaxed – particularly when Odgoo began singing with her splendid voice, putting all her emotions into the song. The big camel began lamenting a bit herself. She glanced at her little one, and stroked her with her head. Some time later, she at last allowed the young one to nurse. Everyone breathed a sigh of relief, and quickly wiped away a tear.

“Yes grandma,” says the musician, “now it is your turn to sing a song.” Grandmother bursts out laughing. “I can't sing at all,” she says shrilly. Then the guest begins a familiar Mongolian melody, and a few moments later everyone is singing with all their hearts.

#### Source

*The story of the weeping camel* (2003) is a beautiful, quiet movie about nomad life from the Mongolian director Byambasuren Davaa and the Italian Luigi Falorni. The actors play themselves.

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### **152. A small village in Burkina Faso – 2004 – film**

#### **Protection**

Tired, but satisfied, Ciré Bathily walks along the path to his village. In his hand he has the lead rope of the donkey, which is pulling a cart full of corn. For the last week he has worked like a mule to bring in the harvest. He even spent the night in the field, so as not to lose any time. But, the harvest was good.

When Ciré has almost reached the village, he sees his older brother striding towards him. “Ciré, listen what has happened! Your second wife has no respect whatsoever for the customs of the village. She is blocking the circumcision of some village girls. You have to put an end to this right away. For once, show that you are the boss at home.”

Mama Collé is the second wife of Ciré. A few days ago, four girls about ten years old had come running to her, and threw themselves to the ground. “Mama Collé, please help us. We are afraid. We don't want to be circumcised. It is terrible. For God's sake, help us.”

Mama Collé doesn't know what to do. If she helps the girls to avoid circumcision, she will experience the indignation of the whole village. Criticism of circumcision will not be accepted by the men, but also not by most of the women. While she is hesitating, her daughter Amasatou comes to her. “Oh, mama, don't turn them away. They are desperate, you have to help them. You also didn't get me circumcised, did you?”

That is true: when Amasatou had reached the age for it, she decided not to get her circumcised. She herself had suffered so much during her own circumcision – she almost bled to death – that she had resolved to spare her daughter this by any means. So much goes wrong with a circumcision. She was able to convince her good-natured husband Ciré to accept her decision, but since then in the village he is known as a spineless fellow.

Helplessly Mama Collé looks around, the four girls at her feet. The first wife of Ciré blinks her eyes understandingly. Then, Mama Collé remembers, that it is a holy Muslim duty to help people who seek protection of you. Now she is certain what to do, and says, “Girls, you can stay with me, nobody will touch you.”

A few moments later, Ciré enters the house. He is enraged, his face burns with fury. But Mama Collé is resolute. She will go all the way to help the innocent, terrified girls.

#### Source

The movie *Moolaadé* (2004) from the Senegalese film maker Ousmane Sembène is a movie about village life – colourful and charming, until the moment when a terrible conflict erupts.

\* \* \*

### **153. Castellón, Spain – 2006**

#### **The tree of grandpa**

Alma is desperate. A few months ago grandpa stopped talking, and now he also doesn't eat. Alma loves her grandpa. When she was a little girl, they were always together. She could tell him everything. He always laughed and never became angry with her. Together, they walked through the olive orchard with the gnarled old trees. Grandpa told Alma everything about the trees and showed her to plant, graft, and look after an olive tree. Even though she is seventeen, she still loves grandpa so much.

It all started last year. A contractor wanted to buy one of the ancient olive trees. Thirty thousand euro he offered. Everywhere in Europe and even in Japan, there was demand to decorate parks and buildings with the century-old trees.

Grandpa was totally against it. “I will not sell it,” he shouted. “I cannot sell it because it is not from me. These trees were passed down to me by my father, who received them from his father, who again has received them from his father, and so on. They are not from me but from my family. Not from my family but from the history. The trees are my life. You want to take away my life.”

Alma’s father became furious. “We have always toiled here as slaves and never received a penny. Finally, we can make some money from our work, and you want to block it. Think about your children for once and not just about yourself!”

A few months later a big excavator had come to dig up the most picturesque tree. A semi-trailer truck took it away. Alma had stood there with tears in her eyes. Grandpa looked dazed, like he had been slapped in the face. Soon he stopped talking. Instead, he wandered around the orchard in search of the tree, like a father looking for his lost child. Grandpa seemed to have lost his hearing even when Alma spoke to him.

Grandpa also stopped eating. Alma knows what she has to do. She will search for the tree, buy it back, and return it to the farm. Grandpa has to get his tree back as soon as possible. It is the only way to save him.

#### Source

The feature film *The Olive Tree* (2016) by the Spanish director Icíar Bollaín tells the tale of tradition and progress, of loss and hope, and of indestructible bonds.

\* \* \*

#### **154. Mato Grosso do Sul, South-west Brazil – 2008 – film**

### **The young shaman**

It is night. “Uahh!” A shrill cry sounds through the jungle again and again. Osvaldo comes running through the forest. His face is completely blackened by the mud he just has smeared on it. When he arrives at the villa and sees the big landowner standing by his car, he shouts, pointing his finger, “You have murdered Nadio, and now you’re running away. Just run, but if you ever return, you’ll see what will happen.” The white man, alarmed, pushes both his daughters and his wife into the car, and drives hurriedly away. A man with a big gun shouts at Osvaldo, “Get the hell out of here.” Osvaldo answers, “I’m not afraid of you, just go ahead, shoot a bullet through my skull.” Then he runs back to the jungle, and again his shrill cry sounds several times.

Osvaldo is a sixteen-year-old Indian boy with straight black hair. He wears old shorts, and a faded T-shirt. For the past few years he has been anxious, because he sometimes has bad dreams, which afterwards come true. Nhanderu, the old shaman, told him that he should become a shaman. He gave him a holy gourd to play music with, and advised him to pray and sing a lot. He needs to learn how to distinguish good and evil voices.

Osvaldo and his fellow tribesmen are in difficult times. During the last sixty years they have lost most of their jungle, and they have to survive in a small reserve. There is not much wildlife any more, and as a result they are hungry. Forced by necessity, they work for the big landowners, who have settled here, cut down the forest, and established vast sugar-cane plantations.

The old shaman told Nadio, the tribal head, that the situation could not continue like this, that everyone would die or leave, and that it was time to take back a portion of the land of their ancestors and start growing maize there. Then the tribe occupied part of a large field, built huts there, and sowed maize. The big landowner called in the police, but they were unable to do much, because first the court had to give its verdict. The big landowner didn't want to wait that long, and he hired a few criminals, who killed Nadio this night.

When Osvaldo returns to the camp, everyone is gathered wailing around the dead Nadio. Osvaldo goes round with his holy gourd, sings and prays. This night he has pointed out evil, named it, and cursed it. From this night, he knows that from now on he will act when a boundary is overstepped. This night he has become a real shaman.

#### Source

*Birdwatchers* (2008) from the Brazilian director Marco Bechis is a compelling movie about the life of Indians, who are pushed into the margins of existence.

\* \* \*

#### **155. A small nomad camp in Mali – 2012 – film**

## Whiplashes

Anxiously, the handsome young woman looks at her husband with her soft brown eyes, “Kidane, I have to tell you something.” Smiling, he answers, “I know already what you want to say. You want to leave here. But where will we go? Perhaps you are afraid?” “Of course, I am afraid,” Satima says. “I don't like those guys. Almost everyone has left already. Let us follow them.”

Satima and Kidane are Tuareg nomads with a small herd of cattle and some goats. Together with their twelve-year-old daughter Toya, they live in a tent in the desert near the town of Timbuktu. A few weeks ago some pickup trucks appeared with Islamic fighters, who occupied the town and introduced the *sharia*, the strict Islamic law. Since then Satima and Kidane hear the strangest stories. It is forbidden to play music, and if you are caught you get forty whiplashes in public. Playing football and smoking are not any longer allowed, and a girl may not phone a boyfriend. For everything you will be flogged.

- Satima, I am afraid too, but we have to be strong together. I am your husband, you have to support me.
- Every time when you are gone, that scary fellow with his gun comes by. Again yesterday, when I was washing my hair outside, in front of the tent. I should not do it in public, he said, it was contrary to the *sharia*.
- Approaching a married woman, while her husband is away, is perhaps not contrary to the *sharia*?
- I also said that, but he didn't answer me. In the market there are rumours going around that fighters have already taken several girls from their parents to marry them. The imam has condemned it publicly, but they don't care. Let's go away, before it is too late.

While Satima and Kidane lie and talk under the canopy of the tent, Toya milks the goats. After a while, she brings a bowl of milk. Inquiringly, she looks at her parents.

### Source

The splendid and at the same time terrifying movie *Timbuktu* (2014) from the Mauritanian director Abderrahmane Sissako shows how a handful of armed men intimidates a desert town.

\* \* \*

## 156. A hamlet in Colombia – 2014 – film

### Paradise and hell

The stream splashes in a friendly way through the jungle. It is green here: the moss on the rocks in the water, the plants and lush bushes, the trees. Cicadas chirp, insects buzz, and birds twitter. The Garden of Eden must have been beautiful like this. Rocio picks up her tub with just-washed clothes and walks home over the narrow forest path.

What's that? Why is it so quiet? Why doesn't she hear the boys or her husband? What could it be? She walks with hasty steps to the little house. There is nobody around. Plates lie on the floor, in pieces. The cupboard is pulled down. Where are they? Caught by the guerrillas? By the paramilitaries? Quickly she runs into the forest, and hides. Perhaps the men will come back soon.



When it remains quiet, Rocio returns to her home. She is still stunned. She trembles. She cannot believe that now it has happened, what she and her husband were afraid of all these years. She sits on the bed in silence for quite a long time. Then she takes her bag, and stuffs some clothes in it, and a bit of food. She walks through the jungle, the beautiful green that her reminds her of her dear husband, and wonderful sons. The birds sing endlessly. She has to leave this place. Here is paradise and hell, at the same time. She has to go away, to the city. She will find a place, build up something again. Away from here.

#### Source

The beautiful movie *Oscuro Animal* (dark beast, 2016) made by the Colombian director Felipe Guerrero shows three women from little villages in the jungle, where a civil war is raging on for decades. They are silent. They don't speak, because for this unthinkable big violence there are no words.

\* \* \*

### **157. Inguri River, Georgia/Abkhazia – 2014**

#### **Temporary island**

“This winter we will not be hungry,” he tells the girl in a satisfied manner as she is cleaning, salting, and hanging the small fish to dry. The autumn sun is warming the old man on the bank in front of the wood cottage. Everyone calls him 'babu,' grandpa. It is true; he must be getting old. This year he was still successful again. He was in time to claim an island in the river, to build a cottage on it, to dig up the land, and to sow corn. Now the plants are man-sized. The ears are thick.

This year he wasn't alone. His granddaughter stayed with him whenever she didn't have to go to school. She is already brave. She doesn't say much, but she helped a lot in watering plants in the summer heat, in roasting the fish which they had caught in the wicker fish-trap in the river, and in picking up things from the farm. Soon, she will help in harvesting too.

Every winter, the river brings a few new islands. The earth there is soft, but fertile, so fertile! It is a lot of work to build a cottage, dig up the land, and water the plants. You also have to protect the island against animals who will destroy your harvest, or against bad people.

Life is good here – the birds, the fresh air, the dashing water, and the promise of an abundant harvest. However, you must be lucky to get in the harvest in time, before the autumn storms are coming, and the autumn flood inevitably washes away the islands only to bring them back next year in different places. Fortunately, it is almost time to harvest.

#### Source

In *Corn Island* (2014) the Georgian film-maker Giorgi Ovashvili portrays the peasant life on a small, temporary island in a river. With few words, quiet, and impressive images he tells the simple story.

\* \* \*

## 158. Pakistan – 2014 – *film*

### **Happiness and sorrows**

“We can really count ourselves lucky that we met that kind driver. He rescued us.” Allah Rakhi is feeding the chickens. After a long and dangerous journey through high, barren mountains, she has ended up at the little, charming farm of a good friend of the driver, together with her daughter Zaïb. The sun is shining. The small farm lies in a green valley, the Indus flows far down below, and here and there you see the cheerful yellowness of flowering rapeseed fields. Zaïb sketches with charcoal a cow on the wall, with a high hump as you see them walking here, dark brown, compact, and muscular.

Allah Rakhi is not at ease. A few months ago her husband told her that Zaïb had to marry, because he had promised her to a chief of a nearby clan. Both clans are in conflict for years, and there have been many killings on both sides. The clan chiefs had decided together that a marriage had to take place in order to end the mutual revenge killings.

Allah Rakhi had objected, “Zaïb is still so young, only ten years old; she is a child who likes to play with dolls. And the man she has to marry is so old, almost fifty years old. Zaïb will be miserable.” But her husband didn't respond.

When Allah Rakhi was already sewing the wedding dress, on a sudden impulse she made the decision to flee with her daughter. They hid in the top of a big truck. When the driver discovered them, at first he was furious. But later on he was moved by Zaïb, and his sympathy grew for Allah Rakhi, who was clearly willing to do anything for the happiness of her daughter. He brought them to his best friend, who lives on a small faraway farm. There, they are safe.

“Zaïb has to go to school,” Allah Rakhi thinks, “but, is it possible? Won't men of both clans continue searching for her, hunting her? Are we really safe here?”

#### Source

The movie *Dukhtar* (daughter, 2014) by the Pakistani director Afia Nathaniel takes you through the rugged mountains of Pakistan and its small villages in a splendidly decorated truck. She lets you meet hospitable villagers, and murderous militia fighters.

\* \* \*

## 159. Ixcanul, Guatemala – 2015

### **The volcano**

Although she carries quite a big pile of branches on her head, Juana walks briskly and determined up the slope of the volcano. A few steps behind walks her daughter Maria. As quickly and with a same load on her head.

Juana knows what is passing in the mind of Maria, even if she doesn't say a word. Maria wants to go away from here. But why? They have always lived here, already for generations. Near the volcano, their holy volcano.

So often she, together with her daughter, has brought offerings to the volcano. To thank the volcano

for everything life has given them. To ask for protection, for fertility, for prosperity.

Yes, life is hard here. We have to toil for the landowner. The coffee beans don't bring in much. But what do you expect to find in the city, my daughter? Do you know how they talk about a Maya in the city? You are just an outcast. When you are lucky. Otherwise they will think you are a cheap whore. Here, near the volcano, you are someone. You belong to us. Here, the souls of our ancestors are living. We are not rich, but we have a piece of land, we have a pig, we have a house. Yes, it is small. But what do you think you will get in the city? You don't even speak Spanish. Perhaps, you will have to sleep on the street.

Tomorrow, I will go to the volcano, alone. I want to talk with the volcano. I will bring along offerings. The volcano has always protected us. Now the volcano has to help me again, has to tell me exactly what I have to say to my daughter. To convince her not to go to the city. She is too fine for the city. Too attractive for the first malicious, dirty man.

The volcano has always given us everything.

#### Source

*Ixcanul* (2015) is a feature film of Jayro Bustamante, which portrays the peasant life in Guatemala. Without romanticizing; beautiful and hard at the same time. So many youngsters think about leaving the countryside.

\* \* \*

### **160. A village in Rajasthan, India – 2015**

#### **'Let me leave'**

“Don't think that you are at home,” Rani says harshly to Janaki, “get to work, then you are perhaps a bit useful.” Rani is furious with Janaki, a fifteen-year old girl, the newly arrived bride of her son Gulab, who is the same age.

Janaki has deceived her. During the negotiations, she looked so beautiful: big, deep brown eyes, a full round face and splendid long hair. Rani was delighted. Gulab would be very happy with such a handsome bride, and she herself as well for having a daughter-in-law at home. Her life would become easier, and Janaki would give her a grandson.

But, just before the wedding Janaki had cut her hair. When her bridal veil slipped down accidentally, she proved to be very bad-looking. Everyone in the village spoke about it. Janaki said that she had had lice and that cutting her hair was the only thing she could do.

Gulab didn't know how to react. His friends laughed at him. Often he was drunk, and mistreated Janaki. “That is what she deserves,” Rani thought resentfully. But when she heard Janaki cry and beg for mercy, when she heard the blows and abuses of her drunken son, she remembered her husband. How he had mistreated her time and time again.

When Gulab beat and insulted Janaki for the hundredth time, she could not bear it any longer. She stepped into the room of the recently married couple and gripped Gulab roughly by his shoulders. “She is your wife, not just a whore,” she shouted. Gulab was first surprised and then furious. He staggered out of the hut, and went to his friends.

Rani tended to the injuries of Janaki. Tears trickled down her cheeks. Janaki also had to weep. “I did cut my hair myself, because I didn't want to marry Gulab, but a guy from my own village, my best friend, such a sweet boy.” The words come out shakily. “I thought that my parents would cancel the marriage, when my hair was cut. But they just carried on with it. I think they wanted to get rid of me. Let me leave. My friend will look for some work in Mumbai. Together we will manage. Please, let me leave. Gulab doesn't love me.”

Rani doesn't know what to say. She will discuss the issue with her best friends at length. A solution has to be found. So many wives are mistreated by their husbands.

### Source

The movie *Parched* (2015) made by the Indian director Leena Yadav raises the issue of violence against women, and women's firm solidarity.

\* \* \*

## **161. Colombia – 2015**

### **Smoke and ash**

Yesterday evening the welcome back was not really warm, Alfonso thinks, while carefully sweeping away the black ash in front of the small farm. That is how it is, he meditates. Twenty years ago he moved away to the city and, except a postcard now and then, he never has sent news. It is only because Esperanza, his daughter-in-law, has written him a message that he has returned to this place. “Geraldo is gravely ill. Please come soon.”

The small farm is the only one in this area. Besides that you only see endlessly vast sugar cane fields. At harvest time big trucks rumble past with the cut cane. After the harvest the fields are burned off, to make them ready for the next season. Immense clouds of smoke with soot and ash billow through the air. Everything becomes dirty. Breathing is painful. Geraldo, his son, has become dangerously ill from it. Nevertheless he doesn't want to leave, because he wants to stay with his mother Alicia and she cannot make up her mind to leave the farm. It makes Esperanza desperate.

How icy Alicia was, yesterday evening, Alfonso considers, wiping the ash off the leaves with a sponge. Soon the water becomes black, when he rinses out the sponge. She blames him for leaving. That is only logical. She didn't want to sell the farm, giving it up to the demolishers. She didn't want to sell their land to that monster company to grow sugar cane here. That he can understand.

But everyone made the best of a bad bargain, because you are no match for such a big company with their strong-arm boys. Everyone knows that. He himself didn't want to experience the destruction. It was so beautiful here with all the orange trees, the corn fields and the meadows with a few cows and even a horse. Fortunately the huge rain tree just in front of the farm is still there. So many birds are sitting in it, piping the whole day. As long as no fields are being burned off in the neighbourhood.

I did well, coming here, thinks Alfonso, sitting on the bed of Geraldo to feed him. I believe he is happy I came. At least he is no longer alone during the day, when Esperanza and Alicia are gone to cut sugar cane to earn some money. He understands quite well why Alice has become so bitter. But could she

really not understand him? He could not bear to see this beautiful farmland being ruined. Really not!

#### Source

The movie *Land and Shade* (2015) from the Colombian film-maker César Augusto Acevedo shows the transformation of the countryside, where small farms have to make way for giant sugar cane plantations.

\* \* \*

### **162. A village in Anatolia, Turkey – 2015**

#### **Cured**

Süleyman wipes the sweat off his face. He has worked the whole day in his field in the scorching sun. He looks at the familiar forested mountains under the clear, blue sky. He is reluctant to go home. “It is really not my fault, she herself asked it of me. What can I do?”

Half a year earlier, Saniye, the wife of Süleyman, had fallen gravely ill. She was spitting blood, and understood that she would die soon. Saniye urged Süleyman to marry Hayriye, to take her as his second wife. “Who will care for the baby, and the boys, when I am gone?” Süleyman would not hear of it. “Don’t talk like that,” he answered, “you should recover soon.” But Saniye kept insisting. “Just do it, I am so anxious. Hayriye is a good woman, she loves children, and looks good.”

The next day, they went together to the city by bus. At the hospital the doctor diagnosed tuberculosis, and decided on immediate hospitalization. Süleyman was at an utter loss with the crying baby, and the three boys, who were making mischief, while he worked in the field. Hayriye moved into the house soon after. She immediately loved the baby, and looked very well after the little farm.

Against all expectations Saniye finally regained her health, and came home. Everyone was overjoyed! Hayriye too. For Saniye it was difficult to accept that Süleyman slept one night with Hayriye and the next with her. And that the baby was now very attached to Hayriye and had to get used to her. In no time both women were consumed with jealousy. They quarrelled all day long. The atmosphere at home became unbearable.

While walking home, Süleyman suddenly smiled. He had an idea. “Tomorrow I will leave the field alone, and I’ll go to the city. I will buy a nice present for Saniye as well as Hayriye. Then, they will understand that I love them both just as much.”

#### Source

The movie *The Coop* (2015), made by the Turkish director Ufuk Bayraktar, shows the life in a small, remote mountain village.

\* \* \*

### **163. A village in the north of Russia – 2016**

#### **'This is *our* land'**

“People, listen to me,” Aleksander Sergeevich starts his improvised speech at the potato field. About twenty villagers, older and younger ones, men and women, stand by the large field, numb with cold from the morning fog. In the background there is a row of trees in autumn colours. “The city needs this land for a construction project. We have to leave. There is nothing we can do about it. I will get a compensation, and you will get a share of it. We are allowed to go on with digging up potatoes till the first snow.”

The peasants from the village look silently at Aleksander. Their small fields don't yield much, so they like to work from time to time at Aleksander's large farm to get some extra income. When they dig up potatoes they can take one bag of potatoes home for every ten bags they fill.

Finally one of the peasants manages to say “Goddammit!,” and suddenly everyone starts yelling. An old farmer shouts: “A compensation sounds fine, but how will it be next year, and the year after that? We don't want compensation, we want work.”

We won't leave, this is *our* land,” shouts a young farmer with a short beard. “All of us are hunters, all of us have weapons. We won't let ourselves be driven away.” “We'll go to the district,” shouts an old woman, and her sister supports her. “We'll form three groups,” shouts a robust middle-aged farmer. “One group goes on with digging up potatoes, the second protects the farm, and the third helps Aleksander with chores on the farm.”

Aleksander is moved, when he sees how much the farm means to the village. He will not sell the land to the city, and also will not accept the compensation. He hopes it will not end in bloodshed.

#### Source

The movie *A long and happy life* (2016) made by the Russian director Boris Chlebnikov portrays the lives of a small village on an ever-flowing river.

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## 164. Korea – 2016

### **Line of demarcation**

“Well, I think it's clear, my boat was damaged, that's all. I am absolutely not a spy.” Nam Chul-woo, a strongly built man in his thirties with long black hair falling over his face, is desperate. “Why don't you take me back? I want to go home, to my family!” “In that case, first you have to write down your story,” says the man who is sitting in front of him behind the desk, with a faint smile, “from the moment you was born, until now. I want to know everything.” Chul-woo groans, he has already written his story three times, and every time something was not okay, so that he had to write it all over again. He is tired, he wants to sleep.

Chul-woo lives in the south of North Korea; he is a poor fisherman. Early this morning he had gone out in his small boat to his drift-net, to collect the fish. One moment he didn't watch out, and the propeller struck the net. He couldn't get it untangled, no matter what he tried. When he was running the outboard motor at full speed to tear loose the net, the motor burned out. The small boat was now adrift, and

floating slowly with the current to the south. Chul-woo was already near the line of demarcation. He made wild gestures to the North Korean border guards, but before they could send a speedboat Chul-woo had already floated over the boundary line, and there was nothing they could do now. If a military vessel were to cross the line by only one meter, an international conflict would be created.

When Chul-woo's small boat was washed ashore, the South Korean border guards were already standing there with their guns at the ready. Immediately he was brought to an interrogation centre. He had to take off his rough fishermen's clothes, and take a shower. Then he had to put on other clothes: a shiny light and dark blue sweat suit with brand new shoes. He was questioned for hours on end.

After three days Chul-woo was allowed to return to his boat. It had a new outboard motor. Anxiously he went back to the north. How would his wife and his little daughter be? On the coast border guards were already waiting to arrest him. Shortly thereafter he was again in an interrogation centre, this time from the North Korean security service. Again he got a stack of papers and a ballpoint pen. "Now you write exactly what has happened, and what you have seen. I want to know all the details. Understood? Everything!"

#### Source

The movie *The Net* (2016) from the South Korean director Kim Ki-duk tells the story of a poor fisherman who becomes a victim of a complex political situation.

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### **165. Paraguay – 2016**

#### **So familiar**

Step by step, Juan walks into the lake. The cold water gently rolls back and forth like it always does. The sun is shining on the water quickly showing dark spots and light ones. A few branches and leaves float on the water and join in the game of the sparkling water. Juan continues walking. His steps are not as sure as usual. This morning his wife Ana passed away. Juan washes himself thoroughly.

Juan hears the familiar rustle of the waterfall. He looks up and sees the water streaming over the rocks. He sees the trees on the shore. So familiar. This is their forest. A long time ago, he and Ana started a small farm here with a field and a vegetable garden. They raised their children here. Juan dug a well near the farmhouse so Ana always had enough water for her vegetables.

Together they had a nice time. Sometimes it was difficult such as when the harvest was disappointing or when one of the children was ill. But the forest always helped them. In the forest, Juan stored his snares, and Ana collected medical herbs and wild fruits. The children gathered firewood there.

Tomorrow Juan will bury Ana. He will have already dug a hole in the forest, their forest. The sun glitters through the branches. The birds sing. Countless insects fly around in the air and many more crawl along the ground. Juan takes his shovel, walks into the forest, and starts digging. There are so many roots. He cuts them in two with his shovel. Tomorrow he will bury Ana.

At night Juan cannot sleep. He starts a fire and takes a few sips of rum. The crickets give their concert like always and the night birds call. Yes, they had a good time together.

#### Source

In *La última tierra* (2016) the Paraguayan director Pablo Lamar shows us a small farm in the forest with all its sounds. He films so calmly and intensely that it feels as if you are in the forest yourself.

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### **166. A hamlet in Afghanistan – 2016**

#### **Wolves**

“No, no, come here, you have to do it differently.” Quodrat, an eleven-year-old boy, takes the cord that Sediqa is plaiting, puts the loop around his big toe, unravels the last part of the plaiting, and plaits it once again. Sediqa sighs. She is the same age as Quodrat, and she really wants to have a sling, just like the boys; but first she has to have a nice, long, and well-plaited cord. Luckily Quodrat wants to help her. Meanwhile they can also chat a bit.

Every morning a group of children from the village takes the sheep and goats to the mountains to graze. That's quite strenuous work, walking up and down the slopes, in the scorching heat. The girls also collect dung in their back baskets, which the village women use for fuel. But the children have a lot of time to talk with each other, to swim in the river, and also for mischief and quarrels.

Meanwhile, they have to keep an eye on their animals, so that they will not wander off too far, because there are plenty of wolves in this area that would like to eat some mutton. When a goat or a sheep has been killed, the children will get a beating, because the parents have to pay a compensation to the family that owns the animal. And every family is short of money.

Working on her sling, Sediqa says: “That was a thrilling story Haji Ahmad was telling yesterday evening. I have dreamed of it.” Quodrat nods: “When we are a bit bigger, we will go together to the mountains to look for the Kashmir wolf. But you have to be quite good at slinging, at least as well as I do.” “Would you dare do that?” Sediqa asks. “The Kashmir wolf is as big as a large man, and it walks on his hind legs. It will kill us with one blow of his claws, and gobble us up. That is what Haji Ahmad has told us. “But inside the pelt of the wolf is hidden a beautiful yellow-green fairy. I want to see her, don't you?” Quodrat answers.

Suddenly Sediqa leaps up, because she hears a soft howling in the distance. Quickly she looks all around for where her sheep and goats are.

#### Source

The movie *Wolf and Sheep* (2016) made by the Afghan director Shahrbanoo Sadat portrays nicely the life of village children in a harsh environment.

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### **167. A village in Ningxia Province, China – 2016**



## **The old bull**

“Please, father, think about it. If you don't want us to kill the bull, we will not do it,” says the young peasant to his old father Ma Zishan, who comes walking on, carrying a bucket of water, and emptying it into the small basin of the bull, who starts slurping contentedly. The young man brushes him firmly, as he does every morning. The animal is old, and a bit skinny, but his ruddy-brown coat shines. The young peasant cleans his muzzle with a cloth, and the animal looks amiably at him.

A month ago Zihan's wife had died. That was a heavy blow to him. The old peasant doesn't talk about it, but you can see in his lined face that he is missing her a lot. He is obviously affected.

In about ten days the 40 days disappearance ceremony will take place. Then, many people will come. What will they give them to eat? His son had said: “We can slaughter some poultry, or a lamb, but that will not be enough. Let us just kill the bull. The animal is already so old, it almost cannot pull the plough any more. And it is a nice sacrifice for mother. She worked her whole life so hard, she was such a good woman. She has deserved that we honour her with a generous offering.”

But Zishan cannot do without the animal, with whom he has worked together for so many years. “You can make that decision yourself,” he had answered his son.

Finally, Zishan makes it known in a covert way that they can slaughter the bull. He cuts some extra alfalfa in the field, to pamper the animal. But it is as if the bull senses what is about to happen. He sniffs at the fodder, but doesn't eat it. He also leaves his water untouched.

When the bull is slaughtered a few days later, Zishan is not there. He has gone for 'some shopping'. He doesn't want to witness it.

### Source

Wang Xuebo beautifully paints the peasant life in a remote part of China in his movie *Knife in the clear water* (2016).

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## **168. A village in Burkina Faso – 2017**

### **The petty thief and his grandma**

Mame hasn't been so happy in a long time. The robust, sturdy old woman with the heavy glasses, whom everyone in the village calls 'Mame', has just received a visitor. And what a visitor it is. Her grandson Ady from France has come! She takes his hand in hers, and says maybe ten times in Dyula that she is so happy to see him, so happy, so happy.

Ady is an unruly, obstinate adolescent from France. His father, who originally came from Burkina Faso, has sent him to his brother Amadou in that country. He has told Ady that he will go there for vacation, but asked Amadou to give him a good talking-to, because Ady is completely on the wrong track. He has become a petty thief, who doesn't listen to anyone.

Now, Ady lives with his uncle in a small city in Burkina Faso. That's not easy for him, because his uncle is very strict. He has to work to pay back the two hundred Euros he has stolen the last few

months in France. Ady had imagined his 'vacation' quite differently. He is angry, and wants to go back home at once. But that's impossible. When Ady just had arrived, his uncle Amadou asked him for his passport. When the boy handed it over, unaware, his uncle hid it away. He will only give it back when Ady has earned back all the stolen money, and has returned it.

From time to time, Ady walks to the village to visit his dear grandmother, Mame. Yéli, a charming granddaughter of Mame, who lives in the same village, translates. She is the same age as Ady. Sitting together at the vegetable garden to chase away the birds, Grandma tells about life in the village, and Yéli translates. Finally, Grandma asks Ady why he looks so dissatisfied. When he explains the situation, she says “Ady, my darling, it is time for you to become a real man. Listen to your uncle. Do the work he assigns you to do. It is not that difficult. Your uncle will help you to become a real man, whom we all can be proud of. Just do it. We will all help you.”

When Ady walks back to the town, Yéli walks along with him for quite a long way, and makes him laugh with all sorts of funny stories.

#### Source

The film *Wallay* (2017) made by the Swiss director Berni Goldblat tells the story of a French adolescent, who has arrived in Burkina Faso. The movie beautifully depicts the landscape, and also shows a bit of the village life. Goldblat himself has lived in Burkina Faso for the past several years.

***The End***