

Capricho.

A Summer in My Garden

Beat Sterchi

Novel

German



For years he's been wanting to write about the history of the Catalan mountain village where he retreats every summer to write. This time, he means to get started. Beat Sterchi's first-person narrator has already made plenty of notes and read extensively about the little village, which has a colourful past. He could start right away. But the writing isn't going well. He keeps losing the thread and leaving his desk. Seeking distraction and inspiration in his garden, his 'huerto' on the outskirts of the village, he finds himself going there more and more often with his hoe and notebook. First he has to get rid of all the weeds - only then can he plant vegetables. And he has big plans: potatoes, cucumbers, aubergines, onions, tomatoes, courgettes...

"The sure sign of a beginner is scything too fast, hoeing too fast. Flurrying in general. I knew that. But working slowly must be practised."

Title

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Photo: Franziska Rothenbühler

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Excerpt translated by Caroline Waight

The Marten, the Vultures and the Hoe

The gorse was in bloom. The terraced hillsides through which the narrow, jolting road led down to my village from Morella seemed sprinkled with gold dust. I was glad the trip had gone smoothly, of course, but I was also pleased to be getting back to my vegetable garden, and to my desk.

I wanted to plant potatoes!

For the first time!

I pictured at least twelve rows.

Twelve beautiful, straight rows, each as long as the vegetable garden is wide. I wanted to start scything and hoeing from day one.

When I got out of the car, the first thing I heard was the twittering of birds.

As I'd expected, the weeds had overrun my huerto, as they call irrigable vegetable gardens here, reaching up to my knees. Brambles, too, were sprawling indecently once more. But the almonds hadn't frozen, the apple tree blossomed, the two still-tiny olive trees had wintered well, and the vines and rose bushes were sprouting merrily, albeit obscured and crowded.

I set off as soon as I arrived, and on the way back to the village I was already planning what I'd do, considering what tools I'd need first and where I'd find them. Along the way I noticed that the pig farm had just mucked out the sties, and at the same moment I saw an old Land Rover heading towards me. I recognised my neighbour Ramón, with his brother in the passenger seat. Both were smoking cigars, both were burnt brown, both were laughing.

Cuando vienen del campo vienen cantando, I called to the Land Rover. They say you come back singing from working in the field, don't they?

Ramón shook his head. ¡Vienen cansados! You come back tired. Then he laughed, and his brother laughed too. It was good to see them laughing and unchanged.

Up in the village I bumped into Rosé, my neighbour from across the way. Bienvenido, she said. Then

she asked if I'd heard.

What? Who died?

Nobody, she said, but a hurón had killed her chickens, all of them! Imagine that! All five chickens, and the rooster to boot!

Surely not, I said, and while she protested her fury, I was wondering whether a hurón was a marten, a weasel or a ferret.

The beast just gets in and kills them all! This is the second time now! Maybe you have some idea what to do about it?

Sadly I had no idea whatsoever. I replied only, Tricky, tricky. Or at least, that's how I remembered it the next day, when I went back to my huerto from the village and passed the haybarn where I once saw one of the little creatures vanish underneath the roof.

Now, over my left shoulder, I was carrying the scythe and hoe I had fetched from the old stable. I had brought a large pair of garden shears with me too. The sky was a luminous blue, and I saw vultures circling above the ridge nearby, which in the village they call El Castillo. At least half a dozen. From a distance, I saw old Marcos watering his huerto. He raised his arm in greeting and I raised mine, then I thought, what a beautiful gesture, and I raised my arm a second time.

It was cool, but a divine morning. Taking off my jacket, I beat the scythe into the knee-high weeds as though I'd done nothing else all my life. Then I laid bare the rose bushes and vines, tackled the brambles with the shears – soon I was sweating – and discovered some chard, wild and luxuriant, and even the lanky offshoot of an almond tree. Once I started digging, I soon realised that I urgently needed a better hoe, or I would never manage to dig those twelve beautiful rows for the potatoes.

I wish I could have jotted down that I heard a cuckoo and a woodpecker, that I heard the poplars' tall trunks groaning in the wind, but I didn't have a notebook with me.

If I had, I would have written that I wanted to proceed with greater caution from now on.

No need to be hasty in bowing before the soil.

The sure sign of a beginner is scything too fast, hoeing too fast. Flurrying in general.

I knew that.

But working slowly must be practised.

Walking back, I took the same narrow track along the irrigation canal. Where the water wasn't obscured by rampant growth and wild grasses, where I could see it, it was clear as glass, gushing, and when I heard a gentle splash I knew it was a frog.

Further ahead, old Marcos was waiting.

His straw hat pushed back, he was rolling a cigarette.

When I asked if he'd seen the vultures over Castillo, he laughed. ¡Hombre! Those are crows!

Oops, I said.

As we walked up to the village, he poked fun at my farming.

When he fell silent, sniggering, I said I'd already scythed and that I'd started digging – well, hoeing – but now I wasn't quite sure of the best thing to sow or plant.

Onions first! Like last year, he said.

Artificial fertiliser again?

No, you need proper manure.

From the pig farm, you mean?

No, sheep's dung is better!

He'd got a whole load of it from Ramón.

He'll give you some too. For free!

Well, I could head down to his farm.

And when I said I wanted to try potatoes that year, he said, sure, that was the whole point. Why else would I need a huerto? Only, I couldn't use shop-bought ones for planting. They'd been chemically treated, so they wouldn't germinate.

He'd give me some.

And with a contemptuous glance at the hoe over my shoulder, he said, If you want, I can lend you a proper hoe, too. One from before the war. ¡De antes de la guerra!

It's fine, I'd like to get a new one, I said.

When I drove into Morella to buy newspapers, I dropped by the hardware shop.

The woman gave me a friendly greeting and enquired solicitously what I was after.

She sold me a much lighter hoe, showing me how you attach the head to the tapering handle by tapping

it on the ground. I thanked her at the till, praising her expertise, and she asked me if I was getting into farming.

Just a few rows of potatoes, I said.

Have fun then, she said, and saw me to the shop door. According to my notebook, I also found the time – probably in a café in Morella – to jot down a few words about her black hair, which had come loose when she showed me how to fix the handle to the hoe.

Back at the huerto, I did my best to keep a calm and steady rhythm with the new hoe. The longer handle and smaller, sharper blade made it a much easier job. I thought of the elderly people in the village, whom I'd seen still hoeing their terraced huertos. The way they raised the hoe and let it fall without much force, without the hoe snagging in the earth, which I kept doing. How skilfully they grasped weeds and roots as they went, freeing them from the soil and pushing them into straggling piles alongside. Legs apart, bent over at a right angle, and very, very slowly but for hours – that was how the elderly hoed.