

Anna Brigadere "Dievs. Daba. Darbs." [God. Nature. Work]

Excerpt

Translated by Kaija Straumanis

Biography: Anna Brigadere (1861–1933) was a Latvian writer, playwright, and poet. In 1897, Brigadere turned her focus exclusively to literary work, and her first book *Vecā Karlīne/Old Karlina* was published. In 1915, Brigadere fled to Moscow where she wrote her poem *Spēka dēls/The Son of Might*. In 1917, she returned to Latvia and spend most of her summers in the *Sprīdīši* property, posthumously turned into a museum in her honour. She spent years between 1926 and 1933, writing her autobiographical trilogy: *Dievs, daba, darbs/God, Nature, Work* (1926), *Skarbos Vējos/During Wild Winds* (1930), and *Akmeņu sprostā/In a Stone Trap* (1933). This trilogy is seen by critics as the writer's greatest literary contribution, however many of her works and translations are now part of Latvian literary and storytelling classics, and have significantly shaped the contemporary fairy-tale tradition. In 1926, Brigadere was awarded the 3rd class Order of the Three Stars, and Anna Brigadere Prize was re-established in 1986 to celebrate achievements in Latvian literature.

Synopsis: The first part of Anna Brigadere's autobiographical trilogy 'God. Nature. Work' is a psychologically nuanced portrayal of a servant girl named Annele and the way her character develops as she comes to understand the world around her. This story reflects the author's own childhood memories, of when she first learned about the word of God, the natural world around her, and everyday work. Annele comes from a servant family. Each year on Jurgī (St. George's Day) they move to a new home and therefore also into a new world. The people she encounters leave a considerable impression on Annele. As she comes to understand life's truths and encounters injustice, so she begins to grow up. She learns about holiday traditions and the patterns – as well as, in her opinion, the oddities – of adult life.

Brigadere's memories reveal a small child's innocent view of life, which can, at times, bring both tears of joy and sadness to the eyes of the reader. For example, Annele is out on a visit and is given a slice of bread and honey – a food seen as a great treat. However, Annele doesn't like the taste of it and leaves the bread by a fence. When she returns, she tells the lady of the house

Anna Brigadere "Dievs. Daba. Darbs." [God. Nature. Work]

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Translated by Kaija Straumanis

that a dog snatched the bread out of her hands. The lady comforts the little girl and, as a consolation, gives her a new slice of bread and honey.

Along with its realistic and gripping portrayals of country life at the turn of the twentieth century, modern-day readers enjoy Brigadere's expressive language in *Dievs. Daba. Darbs*, in which Annele describes everything she sees and hears simply, without pretension, and in a heartfelt way.

Excerpt:

FARM-HANDS

Ludis darted in and out of the house, throwing the door wide open like a gate. No one scolded him. No one was worried about keeping the warmth in like in the winter. The wind rushed past the doors, the windows. Every corner stood empty. The woman who had swept and mopped them had since left, so she wouldn't have to hear the complaints of the new tenants about any dirt or cobwebs left behind.

Ludis had been the flock manager that summer, hired from next door. He knew the Kamenes property like the back of his hand because he was there almost every other day. There wasn't anything to do here today, but he'd shown up bright and early to see who was moving out of Kamenes and who was moving in on St. George's day.

Each time he ran in, he went straight to Annele.

Anna Brigadere "Dievs. Daba. Darbs." [God. Nature. Work]

Excerpt

Translated by Kaija Straumanis

"What do your parents do?"

"They're farm-hands."

"Where do they farm?"

"To the end of the world."

"Where's the end of the world?"

"Past the sun, past the moon, past miles and miles of sea," Annele recited, lowering her head and trying her best to correctly pronounce her "s"s.

Ludis burst out laughing, spun on his heel like a tire and ran off; but soon enough he was back again, asking Annele what her parents did, and where the end of the world was.

That made it three times he'd done this.

Annele pursed her lips tightly, tightly, and tucked her chin to her chest. No more.

Even though Ludis was someone whom Annele trusted, in this moment her suspicions were aroused. Why did he keep asking her those questions and what did he find so funny?

"Come on, tell me, little girl, tell me where you're headed? To the end of the world? Where's the end of the world?" Ludis teased, trying to get Annele to repeat the wisdoms he himself had imparted on her.

Annele said nothing.

"Fine, fine, don't tell me, but then you'll never find out what farm-hands are," Ludis jeered. "So tell me, what is a farm-hand?"

When she still didn't answer, Ludis grew annoyed.

Anna Brigadere “Dievs. Daba. Darbs.” [God. Nature. Work]

Excerpt

Translated by Kaija Straumanis

“It’s your father, your mother, you idiot! You don’t even know. Just look at you! Idiot, idiot, what a waste!” Ludis gave her a shove and ran out.

Annele remained lumplike on her mother’s sewing chair, where she’d been sitting.

Annele had been wrapped in kerchiefs early that morning, and later they’d added a few more that had been left out of the trunk; the kerchiefs made her so tall and so fat she couldn’t move.

When she turned her head, she could see the others hurrying around in the yard outside: her mother, sister, and brother. Her sister’s kerchief had slid back off her flushed face, and her brother had already ruined his new shoes, which he had cried over last night until Mother had finally agreed to let him wear them today. But Mother didn’t notice. She didn’t have time to scold him. Right then she was leading Pērlē out of the stables and hitching her to the fence. Pērlē tossed her head, fidgeted, and moored. Moos echoed from the stables. They were farewells.

A small flock of sheep and shivering white lambs ran across the yard followed by Annele’s sister and brother, both of them waving a long switches. Mother untied Pērlē and quickly led her away after them. Two carts piled with their belongings jostled down the bumpy road and disappeared.

Annele’s eyes darkened. What just happened? No one came back in for her? No one called for her? She’d been forgotten. What was she to do in that empty corner where Mother’s tall bed once stood with its lovely checked blanket and white pillows—this corner that was now empty, black, and horrible!

Anna Brigadere "Dievs. Daba. Darbs." [God. Nature. Work]

Excerpt

Translated by Kaija Straumanis

Is this what the big, long-awaited, talked-about St. George's Day was all about? She was going to have to stay right here. Here, alone, all alone.

Tears welled up and stung her eyes like fiery needles; Annele steeled herself with all her might against the dark, blind fear. She absolutely could not cry out. Then Ludis would laugh at her again. But she wouldn't be able to stand it if no one came for her.

Outside, Ludis whistled and called to someone. A second voice answered. It was Annele's father.

Father! He was still here. He was packing up the last cartload and making the final rounds to see that they hadn't forgotten anything. Ludis trailed obediently behind him. All was well. Father was coming, Father was coming!

And Father did come; he picked up Annele, and Ludis took Mother's chair. Now the room was entirely empty. Ludis's bed and trunk still stood in the yard. The landlady was waiting for the next "farm-hands" so she could show them where to go.

Father lifted Annele and set her on top of the things in the cart. She let out a little gasp, but it was from joy, not fear. What did she have to be afraid of? Father was Annele's "rock."

The kerchiefs were slipping down from her having sat so long. Father stepped up onto the cart and retied them as best he could. Annele shook her head and giggled, making all the kerchiefs slip down again. Then Father angrily shook his finger at her and retied them, tighter. Annele was to behave. Clearly, Father didn't know how to play.

Anna Brigadere “Dievs. Daba. Darbs.” [God. Nature. Work]

Excerpt

Translated by Kaija Straumanis

When the cart began to move forward, Ludis grabbed hold of the ropes tying the load down and leaned back on his heels—much to Annele’s delight, he skated along behind them for a bit, the hem of his sweater dragging in the mud, his tongue darting out at her like a red flame first on one side of the cart, and then on the other. Then Father noticed Ludis and shook his whip at the boy.

“You scoundrel! Have you no shame?”

Ludis let go, landing in a large muddy puddle and stood, watching the cart as it rolled away. Then, as if suddenly remembering, he shouted:

“Annele, what are your parents?”

But instead of an answer he got a mouthful of wind that sent him sputtering.

The wind washed away the clouds overhead like water, revealing a blue, shimmering sky and sparkling sun.

When Annele looked back at the bend in the road, the Kamenes property began to disappear. First the granary, then the barn, then the house, then the garden. Then only the well-sweep remained, stretching high like an index finger; then it, too, disappeared behind the bushes. It was as if the Kamenes property and Ludis had sunk into the ground.

And then up ahead rose a different property, which Annele had heard mentioned numerous times when they still lived at Kamenes.

“There’s Grāvmaļi,” Father pointed with the handle of the whip. Grāvmaļi was an old, sullen looking property. The house pitched toward the road like a fat, old woman with a disfigured chin. But on the opposite side of the road stood the Vilki property, bright in the sun,

Anna Brigadere “Dievs. Daba. Darbs.” [God. Nature. Work]

Excerpt

Translated by Kaija Straumanis

white and stately like jugs. The Vilki yard was busy with carts both empty and full, colorful kerchiefs darting about, the lowing of livestock. And then that, too, disappeared and was left behind.

The road went on for some time through a marshy scrubland, where lapwings darted to and fro on the ground between the mounds and moss, and where brown water glistened in the deep roadside ditches. Then the road passed through a field, where a new length of turf stretched as far as the forest’s edge, and larks flew endlessly like silver strings of pearls, scattering their trilling birdsong. Then came a crossroads, from which four roads unfurled in four different like yarn from a skein—and along each of them traveled still other farm-hands, their cart bells tinkling, here and there like in a mass dance. Annele’s Father’s cart crossed the main road, and continued straight ahead.

The road stopped suddenly. The carts stopped at the edge of a gulley and then slowly started to sink. Annele gasped. Never before had she seen such a deep depth. And what was that rushing by down there, head over heels, foaming and roaring! It was so gigantic and powerful compared to her, a little speck of dust in a cart!

“Papa, Papa, what’s that thing roaring down there?” she pointed in awestruck fear.

“That, child, is the Tērvete River. It’s so big right now because of the spring floods.”

“The Tērvete,” Annele thought, still in wonderment, because Father’s explanation hadn’t helped her understand. “The Tērvete, the Tērvete, that’s the Tērvete,” she repeated

Anna Brigadere "Dievs. Daba. Darbs." [God. Nature. Work]

Excerpt

Translated by Kaija Straumanis

again and again. How it moved, how it roared, how it foamed! And she felt as if that same, melodious song roared, sang, and bellowed in her chest!

At the bottom of the gulley they crossed a bridge. The foaming water churned black and deep, and flowed so swiftly that neither the winds, nor the clouds could keep up with it.

The valley was warm and sheltered, like being in a pot. Mother and Pērle were up ahead, as were Annele's brother and sister with the sheep. There was a lush little grassy area on the riverbank where they could rest and let the animals graze.

Everyone needed to rest. The men halted the horses and hung feed bags over the animals' necks. Annele was lifted down from the cart. Mother took a bundle out of one of the carts. In it was half a loaf of bread with a hole bored in the center. The hole was filled with freshly-churned butter, and stoppered with pieces of bread crust. Mother cut the bread and spread each slice with butter. Everyone sat in the grass like gypsies. Only the older children were missing; they'd run down toward the churning river, one to gather materials for a willow whistle, the other to pick flowers, which grew here in a multitude of colors.

Annele wasn't allowed to go off with them, nor could she. As soon as she took a step forward she tripped on the kerchiefs and tumbled over, sending the others into peals of laughter.

She didn't need to go anyway! Her sister ran over with flowers, all for Annele; her brother ran over with his willow whistles, also for Annele.

The leftover bread was crumbled up for the lambs, and Pērle was given the crusts. The men had a smoke, and then they prepared to head out. The carts were led one by one up the

Anna Brigadere "Dievs. Daba. Darbs." [God. Nature. Work]

Excerpt

Translated by Kaija Straumanis

steep gulley road, with Father at the back pushing and bolstering them; the harsh winter and subsequent spring floods had left large gouges in the road.

When Father came sweating and flushed to get the last cart, the rest of them stood to follow. Away from the pleasant valley. The lambs were carried like children up the hill so they wouldn't get tired.

At the top of the hill they were plucked at and rattled by a sharp wind. It was a whole new world up there. It opened before them like a book, infinite and wide, and farther off it narrowed and grew small again; it was immensely radiant in places, illuminating like whitecaps on waves the white houses, the light-green groves, faraway hills; elsewhere it grew dark in patches as clouds slid across the sun like a menacing beast. All of these inexhaustible, ever-changing images filtered in through Annele's eyes and stayed there. Again and again, until her head eventually felt heavy and overwhelmed and began to droop like a blade of grass. The woods, countryside, fields, clouds crashed down on Annele in an attempt to smother her. She cried out.

"Annele, it's alright! Open your eyes!"

Annele opened her eyes as wide as she could, and saw Father's bright, smiling face.

"Where's Mother?"

"She's a ways ahead of us."

"Are we at the other end of the world yet?"

"Soon."

Anna Brigadere "Dievs. Daba. Darbs." [God. Nature. Work]

Excerpt

Translated by Kaija Straumanis

The wind stopped suddenly, as if someone had dealt it a blow. A forest of birch trees unfolded in front of them like a billowing, shimmering canvas hemmed in green. They drove into it. Fringed shadows swung over the road, sticky, rough branches with curled leaves caressed Annele's cheeks. *Cuckoo, cuckoo, cuckoo!* A cuckoo bird's song echoed nearby, then faraway.

"Papa, what's making that sound?"

"That's the forest's main clock."

"The forest's main clock?" Annele asked in wonder.

Cuckoo, cuckoo, cuckoo! came from the other side of the forest.

"And those are the little clocks," father said and pointed to the winged collective chirping and hopping among the branches.

Aha! Now Annele understood. Yes, that's what clocks did. They made the forest ring with sounds. More vibrantly and many-voiced than the loud and swift Tērvete. The deeper they went into the forest, the more she liked it. Once again there was more than enough for her to see and hear.

The road led them back into the sunlight. To the right, the forest retreated and curved around a wide woodland field; to the left it continued right along the edge of the road like a living, glittering wall. Then both sides of the forest stopped abruptly, and they had reached Kaltiņi, the forester's property. The rest of Annele's group were already there.

The carts came to a stop in the yard. The farm-hands were home. The big move was complete, and now they could begin settling in.

Anna Brigadere "Dievs. Daba. Darbs." [God. Nature. Work]

Excerpt

Translated by Kaija Straumanis

Two older girls wearing pink coats with wide, puffy sleeves, their yellow hair in braids, stopped Annele and talked loudly and giggled, trying to befriend her and promising her wonderful things.

"Look, Annele, see, these girls are your relatives," Mother urged her. But Annele tucked her head into her sleeve like a bird into its feathers; she didn't want to see anything more. Her eyes were full of everything she had seen and like flowers heavy with morning dew. Her eyelids slid shut.

Anna Brigadere "Dievs. Daba. Darbs." [God. Nature. Work]

Excerpt

Translated by Kaija Straumanis

MY FINGER HURTS

Spring pushed toward summer, and the more it pushed, the more work there was to be done.

The adults were always bustling around.

Mother also went around nonstop. But Annele felt safe clinging to her mother's skirts. Because who could trust this unfamiliar house with its unfamiliar corners, those unfamiliar faces that sometimes swooped down to her eye-level, laughing, at times terrifying her and at times trying to coax her out. No, she couldn't be sure of those faces yet, if they were friend or foe.

Mother grew tired of being constantly trailed and often sent her away: run along by yourself and do your own thing. But Annele didn't know anything about doing her own things.

One morning Annele was crouched by the fire pit, where her mother was quickly making breakfast. Steam billowed from a large, boiling pot that hung on a black hook over the fire. The flames jumped joyfully; sooty, red strings of pearls streaked and danced to a fro along the fat bottom of the pot. Annele so wanted to reach out and touch those pearls. But each time she reached out, her mother barked at her: "Careful, you'll get burned!" and Annele would draw her hand back.

But if she obeyed Mother each time, how will she ever know what that means: to burn?

Next time she'd do it!

And then she does it.

Oh, oh, that searing pain down through every bone, through every vein! Now Annele knows what it means: it burns, burns, burns! She also knows it’s her own fault, she can’t cry out, but then what can she do? She’ll trap the cry in her lungs, but where can it go from there? The cry plies its way back up to her throat, and when it finally breaks free it does so with such force that it makes Mother’s ears ring and the ladle drop from her hand.

The finger point straight up like a rabbit. Mother grabs it and inspects it: no blood, no wound. All that crying for nothing! Annele gets a swat to the ribs for scaring Mother and for disobeying her.

Mother had hit her! That hurt even worse than her injured finger. Except she couldn’t tell where the hurt was. Somewhere deep, deep onside. Annele pressed her hand to her chest and curled into a ball, wailing mournfully.

It burns, burns, burns! But she couldn’t tell where.

Mother didn’t pay attention. She grabbed the dishes, ready to hurry outside.

But it wouldn’t be that easy for Mother. Annele would make her see the great offense that nasty pot had done her. She should at least give the pot a proper scolding. And then fuss over and soothe this awful, aching pain.

And so—wherever Mother turned, Annele was there; whenever Mother pushed away one of Annele’s hands, and Annele grabbed onto her again with both, hanging off Mother’s skirts like an apple from a branch; when Mother told her to hush up, and Annele would squeal like a pig; when Mother made for the door, a bucket in one arm and Annele on the other, they

Anna Brigadere “Dievs. Daba. Darbs.” [God. Nature. Work]

Excerpt

Translated by Kaija Straumanis

get stuck in the doorway—then Annele got a second swat to the ribs and was just able to catch hold of the doorframe to stay on her feet. Meanwhile Mother went out, threatening to come back with a switch.

Annele stood slumped by the doorframe, clutching it with her fingers and soaking it with tears. She’s in everyone’s way here, but she refuses to move. When someone goes by she nudges her: “My, my, have you no shame? Such a big girl, crying like a calf.”

No shame? She’s so ashamed she can’t lift her face. But what can you do when pain and spite are weighing down your bones?

Then their relative’s oldest daughter shows up—the one with the puffy pink sleeves who had come out to greet them on St. George’s Day. She’s always giggling. When she sees Annele, she immediately begins to recite:

Look here, look:

The goat ran away,

And left his horns behind!

Do you see, do you:

Where his horns are?

There, there: on Annele’s head

Growing sharp as hooves!

And she points to Annele’s forehead.

Anna Brigadere “Dievs. Daba. Darbs.” [God. Nature. Work]

Excerpt

Translated by Kaija Straumanis

Terrified, Annele gasps and her injured finger flies up to her face.

Oh Lord! What if she really has horns! But no, her forehead is smooth as always, no matter where her fingers touch.

Meanwhile the older girl is doubled over with laughter.

Annele sees she’s been tricked, and her eyes once more well up with tears.

Does even this girl need to make fun of someone else’s pain? Oh, there’s nowhere for her to turn. Wherever she looks the world is blurry and dissolving, she can’t see clearly, can only make out her mother running by in the haze, probably to get the switch; if Mother comes back with a switch in hand, then her life will be over. There’s nothing for her left to do but run: run off into the world, away, away from people like this.

Annele’s feet carry her off to where she’s never been before, far, far. Past the stables, past the garden, she doesn’t care about them anymore! Now she’s past the granary. The new rye crop flows past in waves like a green brook. Let it flow. Annele has to get away.

Suddenly, a very large hole comes into view ahead, big enough for her to fall into.

There’s no way to cross it. Annele has to stop.

What could be shining down there, deep in that hole? She should take a look.

Annele gets down on her stomach—and goes sliding down on a pillow of sticky mud as if it were ice.

And what does she find at the bottom? Brown water, an overturned barrel, and sitting atop some caraway plants a big, green frog. It glistens in the sun and croaks:

Anna Brigadere "Dievs. Daba. Darbs." [God. Nature. Work]

Excerpt

Translated by Kaija Straumanis

"Good morning, Annele!"

Annele can't quite tell whether she and the frog have met before.

She thinks they have. She crouches on her pillow of clay and sucks on her hand:

"My finger hurts."

"Green grass, green grass," the frog ribbits through a flared nostril.

Annele turns her head. Where?

There it is. The edge of the hole is trimmed with soft, velvety turf. It would be nice to touch it, but Annele sighs again:

"It really hurts!"

"White birch trees, white birch trees," the frog ribbits through the other nostril.

Annele tips her head back.

There it stands, a noble birch, with one foot inching into the hole, and behind it scores and scores of birch trees just like it.

The first birch has grown so very high into the blue sky that she can't see where it ends, no matter how hard she looks. She can't leave it at that, she has to know.

But the edge of the hole won't let her climb out. Little chunks of clay break off wherever she places her foot, tumbling gleefully and taking Annele down with them.

"I can't," Annele whines to the frog.

"Green grass, green grass," the frog instructs her.

Yes, when she tries with the green grass, then it works, she's able to climb.

Anna Brigadere "Dievs. Daba. Darbs." [God. Nature. Work]

Excerpt

Translated by Kaija Straumanis

The green grass gives her a clump here, and then a clump there to grab onto, and then Annele is out.

"Oh birch, oh birch, where do you end?" Annele looks for it and runs circles around the tree. She can't find it.

"You're much, much, much bigger than the granary at Kaltiņi," she says in awe.

"What's the granary at Kaltiņi but something to hold in my arms!" the birch boasts.

"Your arms are nice and warm."

Annele presses her cheek to the silky, white bark. It's warm! She pets it, caresses it, kisses it.

The supple branches caresses Annele in turn like a faintly fragrant wave.

"And your hair's so long," Annele says, comparing the slender network of branches to her own white, unkempt curls escaping from her yellow kerchief.

"My hair's not that long."

"It will grow, it will!" the birch assures her.

"Where's your voice coming from?" Annele tips her head back to look.

"Try and find it!"

Where else could it be than in that blue-green depth? It's sitting way, way up there and flaps its wings.

"Hoo!" Annele calls; she'll race back to the birch and try to wrap her short little arms around it.

She can't.

Anna Brigadere “Dievs. Daba. Darbs.” [God. Nature. Work]

Excerpt

Translated by Kaija Straumanis

“So fat!”

“We’re all fat, we’re all good,” the tree’s voice sings from its very top.

Yes, they’re all good. There they all stand. A throng of them. Annele will go count them:
one, two, five . . . one, two, five!

As soon as she counts them, there are more to count—and as soon as she counts *them*, there are *more* to count. One, two, five . . . one, two, five!

Annele walks, and then she runs: white and white and white. One looks like the other, the others look like the one: one, two, five!

Once she’s counted quite a few of them, they start to hide themselves. One disappears, then another; they’re replaced by a long, long row of different trees, low-growing, stout, with thick, green coats that reach the ground. They stand side by side and block her path.

Annele is hesitant, but does that mean she won’t go closer? As she nears the green mass, the ground starts to buckle; she takes another step and her foot sinks as if in a pillow. Her shoe fills like a trough, ah! An icy cold races through her bones.

Annele sets the other foot down next to the first, and it sinks and its shoe is also filled. Now she has two liny troughs. The water seeps up, brown and bubbling, over her laces, up to her ankles. She sinks deeper, deeper.

Oh! What’s this! Annele can’t move. Annele is stuck. This is bad. The stout, green trees are bad. *Clack, clack*—something clacks in the thicket.

Oh! Annele looks behind her. All the birch trees are still there. What can they do? They’re also stuck. But they’re all good. “Birch trees, birch trees, help me!”

Anna Brigadere "Dievs. Daba. Darbs." [God. Nature. Work]

Excerpt

Translated by Kaija Straumanis

"Wave your arms! Move your legs!"

Yes, Annele can do that.

She waves her arms in the air, kicks her legs out, flails, leans her weight back, yanks out one foot, then the other, but sinks again; then she moves faster and faster, doesn't let her shoes fill up again, and when her feet touch solid ground, she runs back, back to the white trunks of the birch trees, with fear at her heels, past all of them, past all of them, back there, in the distance, where the golden field shimmers and beckons to her.

Annele runs out into the sunlight. Here's the field, here's the same road along the forest's edge that they traveled along on St. George's Day. Then it was black; now it was green, green, studded with golden stars. In places they've already faded. There were the clumps of bristly white "puffs." When the wind blew, the bristles scattered and flew off, floating through the air.

What the wind can do, so can Annele. She takes a full breath and blows onto the "puffs," chasing round and round after them through the field until the "puffs" have all escaped and there are none left to chase.

Now that she's finished that task, Annele can sit and rest for a moment. She's traveled halfway round the world, after all.

The grass is very thick, the blades reach up high; small rosy and greenish buttons sway all around on slender stalks. What could be inside those buttons?

The buttons are hard. So very hard! Annele squeezes one as hard as she can. Finally, it bursts.

Anna Brigadere "Dievs. Daba. Darbs." [God. Nature. Work]

Excerpt

Translated by Kaija Straumanis

Annele, Annele!

A searing, burning pain strikes her fingers. That's what you get for misbehaving! The large blister from her burn has popped.

"Oh, it hurts, my finger hurts!" Annele wails, looking first to one side, and then the other.

No one is there. Nothing is there.

Annele looks around in fright.

Oh, oh, what's this?

Where is home? Oh, where is home?

Thick grass, stalks, slender, budded stems. But no home. Home has been wiped off the face of the Earth.

"Come here, come here!" Annele calls and waits, but doesn't know who could come. Her chest smarts with the weight of her sadness, it rises like a cloud in her throat, and then comes the downpour of tears.

Where is home, where is home?