

# SPRINGS

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DER BARTGEIER

*Jake Goetz*

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## Jake Goetz



Wolfgang Bauer, *rot, schwarz, weiss*, 2011, pigments, Japanese paper, grinded mineral, acryl on Bristol paper, 290 x 194 mm. © Wolfgang Bauer. All rights reserved.

### 1 Early Summer

From Munich we take four regional trains  
 southeast, watch spruce and fir and limestone  
 erupt in the distance, like a jagged outcrop of  
 mushrooms sent up by the mycorrhizal collision  
 of the Eurasian and African plates. Their hard grey flesh  
 remnants of Tethys: a primeval ocean that found itself  
 sky bound thirty million years ago, and which, in today's  
 warmth, produces in us a feeling of the coastal. An ocean that  
 inadvertently led to the early industrialisation of this place. The first  
 recorded mine in the region opening in 1517. The first taste of  
 capital buried in rich salt deposits. And somewhere between tourists  
 glued to glass and a group of young girls getting pissed on beer, I imagine  
 two Bartgeier above the tree line, perched on a rocky ledge—orange beards  
 like lion manes aflame in the July heat—looking through a light haze  
 to shadows sharpened by peaks. How they'd stand and stretch their wings,  
 lift bodies into the thermals, and swim out across this jagged amphitheatre,

Der Bartgeier

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tracing ridgelines, rivers, ravines. Or tracing the way one Geier pivots, circles, looks to its partner. Then together, turning and circling to lock into a descent. Lock onto the collapsed architecture of a carcass wedged between some crevasse. And somewhere between Berchtesgaden and Königssee, I tell you of the way they prefer bone to meat, can swallow bones the size of a human arm, or, if too large, fly up and shatter them over rocks. A technique for which they've been dubbed the "Knochenbrecher" (bone breaker). Their 0.7-pH stomach acid as severe as a battery, making their digestion the most corrosive of any animal, allowing them to decompose bone to a white chalk that a tour guide—a few valleys over and a few days later—might use to write on the wall of an old hardwood hut, listening to the playful high-pitched disgust of school children squealing with joy. And beyond that familiar noise, we don't need to imagine the snow speaking fast. The way snow melts to a human tongue that carves out the land like an ice cream, to find the clear waters of Königssee, where we sit with pretzels, Obazda, and an Augustiner, watching tourists ferried across the lake in small wooden boats. Ducks at the shore waiting for lunch. The Bartgeier somewhere back above, resting amid the fossilised remnants of ancient crustaceans, watching the light river between peaks. All the angles we see and can't see.

## 2 Das Aussterben

In 1913 the last Bartgeier of middle Europe was shot in the Aosta Valley of Italy. A black-and-white photograph confirming its extinction. Three men in rugged sporting attire holding the largest bird of the Alps up to a camera. Its wingspan over two metres, stretching from edge to edge. The man in the centre holds up what would've been the bird's drooping head. The man on the right, a hint of lips through beard, smiles towards a future with a particular confidence. A future he couldn't have known or should have known but couldn't. Life not easy to comprehend for men raised on the routine death of animals for food, for currency, for sport. Who learnt young to view the nonhuman as if through a glass-bottom boat. As if a painting frozen, framed, and hung on the walls of a Munich museum. Who learnt through stories-turned-to-myths-turned-to-"facts" that the Bartgeier was in fact a "Lammergeier" (lamb vulture) and "Kindsräuber" (child thief), despite the bird never hunting fresh flesh. In Appenzell one was said to have carried off a child in front of his parents. In Urnerland a woman tells of how she was abducted by one as a little girl. On the Silberalp another swooped down on a shepherd boy, tearing him to pieces. But the animal not only made extinct from the Alps through language but human settlement. Its key prey—ibex, chamois, red deer—almost all driven to extinction here. And even when the Bartgeier was able to find a feed, they often died of the poison it had been laced with. And after our lunch, across the lake, in Gaststätte St. Bartholomä, we find a 400-year-old painting of two Bartgeier on a wall. A life-sized depiction of two adults who, according to the inscription, were shot above a nearby chapel on 9 and 10 March 1650. The central adult depicted with its wings extended, much like the 1913 photograph, but with the addition of a small lamb between its feet. The reason for its death illustrated by a text that traces the wingspan in old Fraktur script. On the left: "Because of the harm done by the bearded vulture, people also go after him." On the right: "The 127th one—Hans Dürner has killed it."

### 3 Sostalgia: An Interlude

Through pine forest we trace the lake's edge, get  
naked, and swim out into the cold burn of  
clear reflections. Across the water a  
flugelhorn traces the tectonic  
texture of the valley, where  
today Bartgeier live like  
the first of their kind, and  
where i think of what lies  
at the centre of this desire  
to restore the world to a  
past that is as real as it is  
imagined. To fix a point  
on a specific time in place  
and say: See here? That's  
when things were in per-  
fect motion. When we,  
as humans, held a sense  
of earthly unison. To say  
it's like walking alongside  
a friend or stranger and  
noting how the footsteps  
fall into sync with one  
another. To say, now  
imagine those feet fall-  
ing back into sync with  
the "other." But what of  
the "others" we take on  
this ark of conservation?  
That path of re-creation  
as much as recreation.  
What do the others think  
of our ambition to redis-  
cover ourselves in their  
image? To other ourselves  
through a desire for attach-  
ment. A desire to replicate  
the idea that things never  
change in a world that  
never stops changing. To  
replicate the way humans  
think things should be . . .

Solastalgia is a term that describes homesickness for a place irreversibly damaged by human activity. But what term do we give to the reversal of such actions in a world where such reversals will become just a poor man's re-enactment? By the lake we sit and feel the sun shiver, disappear behind peaks, raise the hairs on our arms and legs, watch smooth grey stones recede into the shallows, the shadows, this turning Earth.

## 4 Sprachlos

In 1986 the first Bartgeier were successfully reintroduced to the Alps in Austria: a breeding program drawing on cousins in Asia, Africa, and southern Europe. And yet today they are still threatened by rogue hunters working through the re-circulation of myths. By animal carcasses riddled with lead ammunition, which kills them almost instantly. The strange evolutionary blessing of a 0.7-pH stomach acid also then a corrosive curse. And for this reason lead ammunition banned in some Alpine regions. For this reason, an EU-wide ban currently being sought in 2025. And as we leave the lake, catch a bus back to Berchtesgaden, board four trains back to Munich, i tell you of their names: Bavaria, Wally, Nepomuk, Sisi, Dagmar, Recka, Vinzenz, Wiggerl. How the colour red has always been more than a colour. How we discover such ideas through encounters. The way red can trigger an increase of blood to the cock. The way like this the colour turns the birds on. Or so some say. And so whenever the Bartgeier can, it bathes its body in pools of iron-rich oxide mud, sits and dries like a Pacific cormorant in the sun. How some say it is an act of flirting, to turn the other on. The way a teenage boy, before a party, will wax his hair, shave uneven stubble, and spray his acne-covered face with an aftershave an advertisement on TikTok told him was slay. The birds known to couple all their lives, but also known for their promiscuity. So too for their queering. Three males in Tirol routinely mating only to find there's no eggs but still mating again, for the thrill, the love, the fuck of it. As we arrive back in Munich and i find a tape measure, show you how their wingspan is the width of your bedroom. How i sit down to write something that might capture a reason for why we do this. Why we seek to give language to the sprachlos. The speechless. Or how our language is a speech laden with the loss of some mycorrhizal resonance. How outside the window, on Bereiteranger street, it's not hard to imagine the sound of wings cutting through the warm evening of another early summer. How, if you listen closely enough, you might glimpse a Bartgeier down by the Isar feasting on a greasy box of chicken bones.





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