

★ **Beasts**

Ingvild Bjerkeland

Rosie Hedger, Translator

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Set in a postapocalyptic world, Ingvild Bjerkeland's chilling novel *Beasts* is about children who hope to reunite with their father.

Thirteen-year-old Abdi is the guardian of his five-year-old sister, Alva, since a beast killed their mother. These beasts struck in cities across Europe, and power outages and shortages exacerbated the fraught situation. "Selfishness spreads like wildfire," as their mother once observed. Armed survivors loot abandoned buildings, looking for food and medicine. With Alva feverish, Abdi is anxious to find supplies and travel to the remote island where their ornithologist father is stationed.

The creatures the siblings encounter in the eerie forest are both real and metaphorical. After they see crows around a beast-slain deer, Abdi confesses that "Fear flapped its black wings within me." The beasts themselves might have come from a dark fairy tale: Six feet tall and covered in black fur, they have hoofs and curling claws that unfurl for attacks. Although the beasts could be symbols arising from nightmares, the carnage they wreak is all too real.

Short chapters and taut prose set a frantic pace. There is no extraneous backstory and details of the ongoing emergencies remain hazy. The novella becomes an allegory for a world in peril. Certain scenes have particular resonance, as when fifty people seek to escape their country on a small inflatable boat. The best and worst of human impulses are on display: Raiders embrace violence in the competition for resources; an older woman, Lucy, offers the siblings shelter and embodies altruism. Throughout, Alva's innocence is a foil for Abdi's unease. The book's inconclusive but hopeful ending invites a sequel.

Beasts combines the timelessness of a fairy tale with the stark immediacy of contemporary dystopian fiction.

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