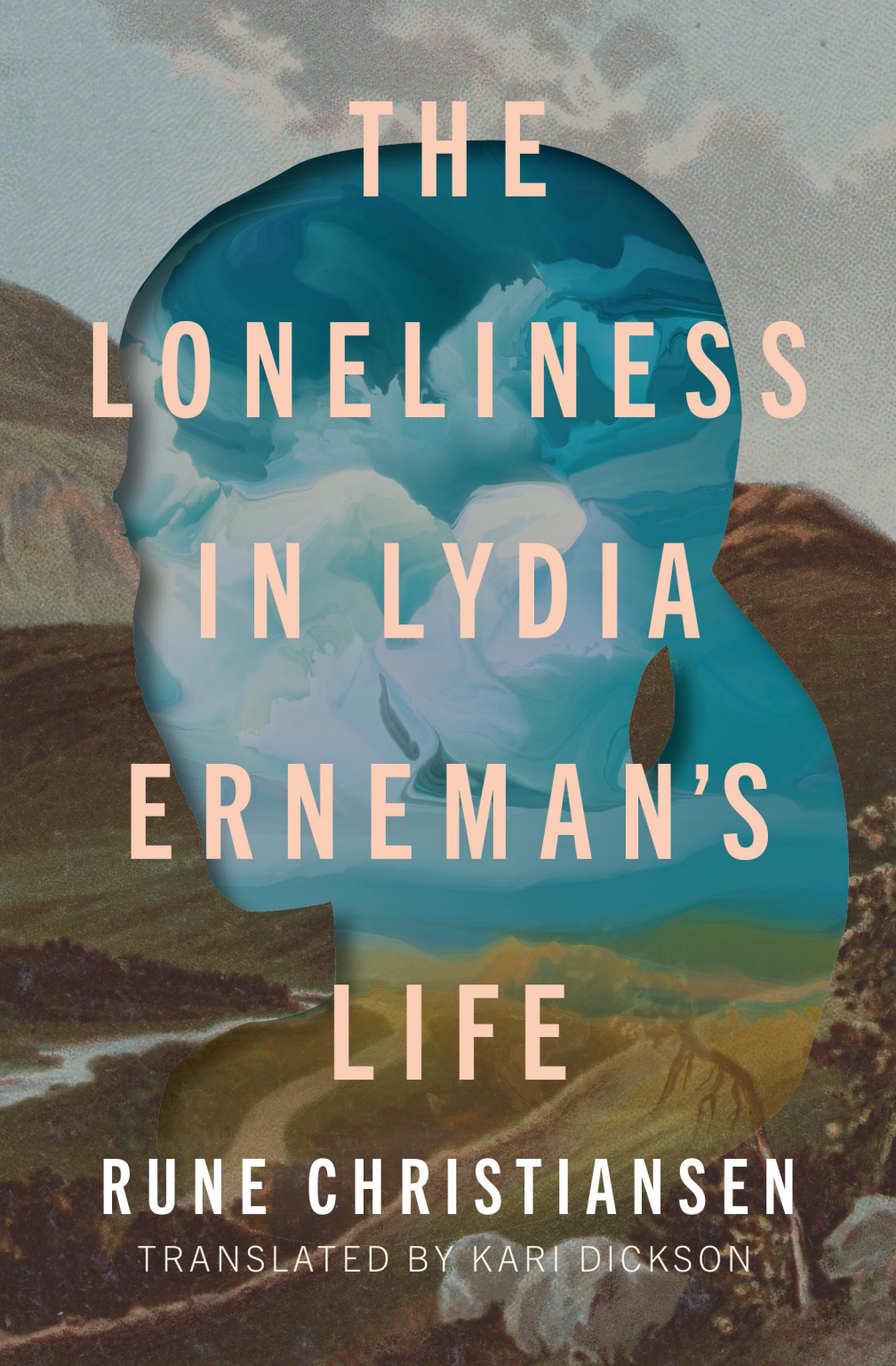
THE
LONELINESS
IN LYDIA
ERNEMAN'S
LIFE
RUNE CHRISTIANSEN
TRANSLATED BY KARI DICKSON

PRAISE FOR

THE LONELINESS IN LYDIA ERNEMAN'S LIFE

WINNER of THE BRAGE PRIZE

SHORTLISTED for THE CRITICS' PRIZE

SHORTLISTED for THE P2 LISTENERS' NOVEL PRIZE

SHORTLISTED for THE YOUNG READERS' CRITICS' PRIZE

"How do you go about making literature of the unobtrusive life? Rune Christiansen offers up a patient and quietly inexorable example in *The Loneliness in Lydia Erneman's Life.* In Christiansen's story of a young woman coming to grips with the most universal, most commonplace trials of our existence, nothing is irrelevant, nothing is silent. A lovely, enriching, compelling work of art."
—Michael Crummey, author of *The Innocents*

"*The Loneliness in Lydia Erneman's Life* is a brilliant portrait narrated with tenderness, acuity, and expertise. Like the best portraits, it doesn't reveal its subtexts immediately. Rather, it beguiles us and shows the colouring of a consciousness and how this palette shifts with the surrounding phenomena and pressures—the influence of strangers, seasons, pain, health, habits, dinners—this ongoing flux of renewal, attachment, and demise."
—Moez Surani, author of *The Legend of Baraffo*

"A luminous example of a book which quietly lifts the reader, an artful, but unpretentious book, written with an almost page-turner ease."
—*Aftenposten*

"An outstanding, beautiful, wonderfully vivid and addictive novel."
—*Berlingske Tidende*

"Rune Christiansen has written one of his best novels… This is an enchanting book on loneliness and love, where practically every sentence can be savoured."
—*Klassekampen*

"Reading *The Loneliness in Lydia Erneman's Life* leaves the reader with a strong feeling of pleasure. This is obviously due to Christiansen's exquisite writing, a distinct style which the author has already proved is among the best we have."
—*Morgenbladet*

"An unusually beautiful novel. Few Norwegian writers write more beautiful sentences than Rune Christiansen. Of course, good literature is about more than beautiful sentences, but there can be no doubt that Christiansen writes exquisite literature."
—NRK P2

"Christiansen has written a gorgeous novel about being alone."
—*Politiken*

PRAISE FOR

FANNY AND THE MYSTERY IN THE GRIEVING FOREST

SHORTLISTED for THE 2017 BRAGE PRIZE

"*Fanny and the Mystery in the Grieving Forest* is among the saddest and most uplifting books I've read. This story of a grieving young woman is told in short bursts of lustrous writing crisp as aquavit that leave the reader seeing the world anew. Christiansen is taking on the big themes, love and death, but I know what side he's on."
—Michael Redhill, Scotiabank
Giller Prize–winning author of *Bellevue Square*

"Rune Christiansen's *Fanny and the Mystery in the Grieving Forest* is one of those special stories I find myself petting once I've finished, as if it were a wee forest creature I have fallen in love with. A shimmering musing on grief, *Fanny* is both ecstatic fairy tale and Gothic novel—beguiling, haunting, and erotic in equal measure. There are very few books I would put in the category of heart places, but this is certainly one."
—Kathryn Kuitenbrouwer, author of *Wait Softly Brother*

"An exquisitely written novel of grief. Rune Christiansen shows yet again why he is one of Norway's leading literary stylists. Reading him is a pleasure unlike any other."
—*Aftenposten*

"Christiansen's stylistic confidence and authoritative writing lift the text to a level rarely reached in Norwegian contemporary literature. *Fanny and the Mystery in the Grieving Forest* deserves not only literary prizes but also an audience far greater than Norway."
—*Dag og Tid*

"A magnificent novel. Gripping, poetic, and thought-provoking. 6/6 stars."
—*VG*

"These fragments are sharper-edged than they seem, and the juxtaposition of whimsical feeling with an evocative handling of depression leads this novel toward its powerful, haunting conclusion."
—*Words Without Borders*

THE LONELINESS IN LYDIA ERNEMAN'S LIFE

RUNE CHRISTIANSEN

TRANSLATED BY KARI DICKSON

LITERATURE IN TRANSLATION SERIES

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You will live far from your home and be happy.
—Edith Södergran

Before all else, it should be said that Dagmar Erneman, mother of Lydia Erneman, almost drowned in her late teens when crossing a river on horseback. She had been out for a ride and was going to ford the river at the usual place, but the animal stepped into a hollow between the smooth stones and lost its balance. Dagmar fell under the heavy body, and as they floundered, she hit her head. She was found at dusk by two boys on their way home from a fishing trip. She was lying apparently lifeless on the bank, and the horse was beside her, neighing and pawing the ground with its hooves. It took the boys a few desperate minutes to heave her up across the saddle and take her back to the village. The episode took place in the fifties, in Frankrike in Jämtland, in the north of Sweden, but Dagmar's daughter, Lydia, did not hear about it until many years later, when she was nineteen and sitting eating with her parents. Her mother had set the table out on the terrace. They helped themselves to food straight from the pans and barely exchanged a word until Lydia announced, unexpectedly, that she was going to move. She had been offered a place at the Swedish University of Agricultural Science in

Uppsala down south and wanted to go, as her dream was to become a vet and work with horses, nothing else. Perhaps it was just natural concern, now that Lydia wanted to leave home, that caused Dagmar to grasp her daughter's hands across the table and tell her about this experience from her youth. Lydia looked at her mother and said she knew how to look after herself, but then her father, Johan, said so had her mother, she had been around horses since she learned to walk. Despite their opposition, when the autumn came around, Lydia Erneman left the family farm in Krokom. She drove all the way to Uppsala in the south and, in the years that followed, passed her exams with brilliant results. She scarcely had time for love, just the odd half-hearted affair, and days could pass between each time she saw her friends. This was not because she was shy or modest, but rather because she was consumed by her studies and the desire to be finished. She wanted to get on, she said, she wanted to work, she longed to fill her life with this work that she loved. She was neither restless nor unhappy in her own company. In fact, it was not unusual for her to think what a good life she had. Of course, she wished she had someone to share her every day with, someone to give herself up to, but this longing was not such that it diminished her existence in any way. She never had to fear being bored. Was she naive in her enthusiasm? No, she was not naive, she was rather level-headed and stubborn.

Her student years passed without Lydia losing patience for even a moment. She was a non-fighter where others struggled, and this irrepressible joy became her identity—her asset, for

want of another word—and when she later applied for a job with the aging vet Carl Magnus Stangel, who ran a prestigious veterinary hospital just outside Tomelilla in Skåne, she already had glowing references from those who had known her at Ultuna, as well as an excellent degree. And Stangel, who trusted his instinct, employed Lydia immediately, almost as soon as he shook her hand. In the weeks that followed, he drove her around the flat, open landscape, so she would get to know the area, and him. It was, for the most part, Stangel who did the talking. Like an Eastern master he told his stories; he spoke at length about the eel's poisonous blood and the import of Holstein cattle to Skåne in the nineteenth century, he described his childhood in Småland and was more than happy to talk about the wild horses—also known as "the horses from the sea"—in the Camargue, where he had lived in younger years, and how wonderful and white they were. One story led to another, and it was the start of what would prove to be a few rich years for Lydia, there in Österlen. But when Stangel retired, Lydia applied for a job at a private veterinary practice in Norway. The clinic was in a rural location some way from the capital and was run by the vet Sigurd Brandt, a man who was in many ways like Stangel. Having shown Lydia around the district, or "parish," as he called it, he offered her the job. And so Lydia left southern Sweden and moved to the neighbouring country. She bought an old but well-maintained house with a mature Victorian-style garden, with flowers and herbs and berry bushes. There was also a greenhouse, and a wall to protect the garden from the northerly wind, but no

lawn, which suited her fine; instead paved pathways wound between the beds, where everything grew with great vigour. The house was tall and white, with steep gables and a picket fence that ran around the not particularly large property. In spring and summer, grass pushed up against the painted wood, and in winter, the snow was left untouched. But now it was autumn, and orange and red leaves floated, swirled, and rustled in the wind. In October, a hint of melancholy came early on the light morning breeze, and yet Lydia often sat out on the small balcony, particularly in the evening, looking at old reference books or writing a kind of veterinary journal, in what was actually a simple, light blue unlined notebook. She could sit with these worthwhile tasks for hours. If she had a day off, she studied and made notes until dusk fell and the words were barely visible on the page. She swung her feet up onto the railing in the twilight and listened reverently to the constant rustling of the garden. She had a view of a couple of chestnut trees. They had grown tall and wide on either side of the gravel path that led down to the old main road. But every so often, a miserable or childish thought might disturb her. For example, she might get it into her head that her life was made up, that it wasn't really real. And it is here, following this rather hasty introduction, that the story of Lydia Erneman begins.

WHERE DOES YOUR NAME COME FROM?

One afternoon in late autumn, on her way home from an exhausting shift in a mucky, cold barn, Lydia stopped the car by the side of the road. She had been invited to dinner that evening and had anything but a good time, but right then she needed a few minutes in the fresh air. She pulled on the rubber boots she kept in the trunk, stepped carefully over the ditch, and tramped off through the boggy undergrowth. She stopped and stood quietly by the edge of a small lake, occasionally lifting a hand to wave off an insect, and a couple of times she reached out toward a dragonfly, not to catch it, more in recognition of a connection there in the dusk. That two creatures should share the same moment, be it ever so fleeting, was certainly not insignificant. Restless bird-song could be heard from the bushes, dry leaves rustled on the breeze, and everywhere the bracken and thistles and coltsfoot leaves nodded and swayed with sleepy, idle movements. Lydia bent down and put her hands into the water; they darkened and disappeared in a muddy cloud. She straightened up and dried her palms on her grey coat, which was already dirty. Even though she had inherited the coat from her mother,

Lydia used it for work in winter. She thought it seemed appropriate now that she and her mother were so far apart. It should not hang in a wardrobe as some kind of sentimental relic, it should be used until it was worn out. In precisely this way, she would use her mother's coat in her work and daily life.

She walked back to the car in the twilight. She did not have much time now to get home, have a shower, and change before going back out. She was not looking forward to it, as no matter how pleasant such evenings might be, she still felt uncomfortable, but it was one of her duties and to decline would be seen as stand-offish, or so Lydia thought, and the invitation had, after all, been well-intentioned; farmers, doctors, teachers, business folk and local politicians, the odd artist, all gathered to strengthen unity and tolerance in the local community. There were, of course, no rules for such gatherings, but Lydia had sensed a certain expectation from the organizers. She recognized it as soon as she received the small envelope with the invitation. It was written in a friendly but gently demanding tone, which she read as a request, something she was obliged to do.

During the meal, her thoughts wandered as she listened. Even in the middle of a conversation with the mayor, she was distracted and had to pull herself together. Was this a deeper reluctance surfacing? No, she dismissed the thought. She had always been careful to steer clear of any snobbery that made others' chat and carefree manners wearying and irrelevant.

When they left the table, she locked herself into one of the washrooms. For the first time in her life, she felt very alone,

left to herself, and to be affected in this way was not like her, she who could enjoy all manner of small detail: the gentle presence she felt in nature, almost imperceptible and yet urgent and alive, when she was with the animals, by the edge of the lake at dusk, in a clearing in the forest—it was all she wished for. And she enjoyed a tussle with a stubborn and obstreperous horse.

It was almost a relief when she had to leave early, called out by Bråthen, one of the many farmers in the area. A stallion had ripped open his flank and needed to be looked at as soon as possible. She hastily said her thank-yous and goodbyes, sent a message to Brandt, and took a shortcut through the garden. It had rained, the grass was wet and the leaves and bushes were full of droplets, the trees were dripping, and the few berries that remained in the hedge that led down to the driveway where the cars were parked were dulled with the damp. She popped a couple in her mouth and sucked the juice. What did the bitter taste remind her of? She was unsure but decided it was some sort of poison and spat them out. Just then she heard footsteps on the gravel. It was one of the guests, a man. Lydia guessed he was in his mid-thirties. He explained that he had come by train from town and wondered if he could perhaps get a lift back to the station. Lydia was loathe to say no. She said he was welcome to a lift, but first she had to check on an injured horse at one of the farms. The man didn't mind the detour, he was just grateful not to have to walk all that way along the verge. They got into the car and Lydia turned the key. It was nice to have someone to talk to. She turned out

onto main road. The man commented on how deserted it felt, and Lydia said you got used to it. She asked if he thought it was cold in the car and, without waiting for an answer, turned up the heating. There was something desolate about the ridge of the hills, something disconsolate, reminiscent of that pessimism that can strike at any moment, even in the company of friends.

When they got to the farm, a rather grand affair at the end of a golden-leafed birch avenue, the fog had descended and lay heavy and low. The yard was cobbled. Lydia got her rubber boots and overalls out from the trunk. She changed unabashedly into her work clothes. Her passenger stood by the open car door. He followed her movements like an awkward assistant, and Lydia suddenly remembered the first time she had gone to a farm on a not dissimilar errand, and old Stangel had had a blank expression on his face, and Lydia had understood that he was preparing himself for what was necessary, however unpleasant, and that the profession she had chosen was a respectable, if at times macabre, one. She realized she hadn't asked what her passenger was called, and nor had he asked her. And now they were standing on either side of the car, and even though Lydia had never smoked more than a couple of times at parties, she suddenly wanted a cigarette. She picked up her big black bag and headed toward the stable, where she shook hands with three men, one by one, as they more or less sprinted in.

The injured horse lay on his side, as though he had toppled over. He was shaking; his entire body was stiff and racked by

cramps and spasms. The wound was so deep it cut through the muscle to reveal the intestines. She remembered a remark Stangel had once made, about how sensitive a horse's hearing was. She hadn't realized that the habit had formed so fast, but it was already part of her. She dropped to her knees to examine the animal and gave it a powerful dose of something to ease the pain. The men stood and watched her work in silence. When she eventually stood up and told them of her decision to put the animal out of its misery immediately, it prompted an uncouth response in the otherwise respectable stable, and one harsh word after another was flung at Lydia, while she, for her part, tried to defend herself against their irate faces with a mixture of infuriation and sympathy. She shrugged and shook her head. Bråthen threatened to sue her, he said she was incompetent and inexperienced, pointed a finger to her forehead and said she was finished there, then he marched out of the stable with the other two men at his heels. Lydia looked at the horse, a numbing fog filling her head. Once again, she dropped down on her knees. She pushed in the shiny, bluish intestines that were spilling out, then cleaned and stitched the wound. She pulled the dressing tight around the belly and back. The horse lifted his head in agitation and snapped at the air.

When she emerged out into the yard, she stopped. As though to make herself visible in the open space. There was something fundamentally wrong with the decision she had made. Everything in her rebelled, but Bråthen's threats had knocked her off balance. She was both absolutely certain and desperately unsure at the same time. The critical question was

not if she had shown a lack of judgment in her decision, but rather if she had the right to defy the farmer's challenge. It was like being hounded by tormentors. She threw her bag and work clothes into the back of the car. Her passenger didn't say a word when she got in, it was as though there was a deeper connection, an accord, a respect between them. Lydia started the car and steered it round the mature tree that had been planted long ago in the middle of the yard to protect the farm. They left the farm and the avenue of bare trees behind and pulled out onto the main road again. The mist had thickened, visibility was appalling, now and then a yellowish light flared as an oncoming car snailed past in the opposite direction. A while later, they were able to make out the shape of a copse, and this eased Lydia's growing anxiety. When her passenger looked at her, she took it to mean he was looking for an answer in her face. She said quickly that he should still be in time to catch his train.

At the station, Lydia offered to wait with him until the train came, in case it had been delayed or cancelled, a friendly gesture the passenger breezily dismissed with a wave of his hand, but then thanked her for, when she insisted. He dashed out to buy a ticket from the machine, stood there in the drizzle, and tapped on the broken glass windshield to no avail, he achieved nothing more than to get wet. When he opened the passenger door, the cold air blasted in, and no sooner had he sat back down and closed the door than the windows steamed up. He apologized and said that this was more trouble than she needed on top of everything else. Lydia barely heard him.

She had to put the horse down. She said this out loud, though mostly to herself. She had allowed herself to be swayed. She had given in to those fools. Her passenger said that if she was thinking of going back to the farm, he would go with her. Lydia looked at him, but before she even had time to protest, he repeated what he had said. She thought it was perhaps madness in the mist, to drive slowly back, but there was no other way.

As they approached the farm for a second time, the passenger told her, as though it was finally required, that his name was Edvin, and Lydia introduced herself in return. They went into the stable together, and even though it was obvious, if not spoken, Edvin asked her what she intended to do. She put her bag down on the concrete floor and nodded toward the door; she wanted to be alone with the animal and with her duties. She got out the necessary equipment, looked at her watch to register the time. A dull anguish spread through her.

When the fatal act was done, she observed her work and felt peace again. She phoned Brandt, apologized for interrupting the party, but asked him to come all the same. Then she walked across the yard to tell Bråthen.

She had been in the stable with the farmer, who was now silent and composed, for little more than half an hour when Brandt arrived in a taxi, and he could confirm that Lydia's decision was justified, indeed necessary. He got straight to the point and told Bråthen that Lydia had done the only compassionate thing and he should have understood that, that anything else would only prolong the poor animal's suffering,

then he diplomatically explained to Lydia that it was perfectly understandable that Bråthen did not want to lose such a beautiful and valuable animal. Not much more was said. The dead horse lay there, a sorrowful sight; Lydia held out her hand, Bråthen shook it and mumbled something about the animal looking so alive.

BREAD DIPPED IN TEA

That night, Lydia dreamed she was home on her parents' small farm. She was of indefinable age, not a child, not a teenager, not an adult, but rather all of these ages at once. She stood in the yard in the pouring rain, looking down at a small pool of water. No matter how hard her father tried or how much he worked on the drainage, small, shallow puddles always formed in the gravel outside the barn, and now, in her sleep, Lydia was unusually taken with this small pool, because the surface was as smooth as a mirror, even though it was raining. How was that possible? Lydia thought, or dreamed that she thought: One always returns, it's necessary. And then she said, "Come, let's go," to no one in particular, and woke up straightaway.

The sounds from the kitchen filled her with slim and short-lived relief. The passenger, this Edvin, had kept her company through the early hours of the night. He had asked her in the car if she would like someone to stay with her, and she said she would appreciate that, and in all the confusion she had welcomed a stranger into her house. She showed him how the sofa in the guest room upstairs could be folded out to make a

bed, and once she had given him a duvet and a woollen blanket, she thanked him and said goodnight.

At the breakfast table, which had been set with the basics—two plates, two mugs, some bread and cheese, a pot of tea—Lydia asked Edvin what he did for a living, and he told her he was currently an actor at the national theatre. Lydia quickly drank some tea as though she was out of time, but then she felt unsure about what he meant by "currently." And as he dipped a piece of bread and cheese in his tea, Edvin explained that in his youth he had decided not to commit to any one job for more than three or four years at a time. He had been a lumberjack, a train conductor, a baker and a diver, worked in a plastic factory, been a guide and a verger. His first job had been as a fireman in a village in Portugal, through a summer and an autumn. He spent eight hours a day up a tower keeping an eye out for smoke on the forested slopes. It required great concentration, there was no time to read or study, he alternated between standing and sitting, he sang to himself or took a CD player with him so he could listen to music, which did not require his attention. And then, as though there was a connection, he asked if Lydia knew that around 90 percent of all silent films had been ruined, lost forever, and somewhat cryptically followed this up by saying he did not like turning up anywhere unannounced, even when he knew the hosts, even when they were his close friends. He spoke calmly, it was like the unfolding of a story, seen from different angles and ever changing, as though the fragments did not have a shared source. When he