

Short Stories and Vignettes

by R. C. Smith

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The Monument 9/2012 • The Mountain Farm 7/2012
The Promise 2009–12/2014 • Red Feathers 5/2014
The Scent of Roast 1/2010 • The Witch 10/2017
The Goatherd 4/2017 • Plucking Roses 2007–11/2012
Teaching 6/2008 • The Basement 9/2020
The Empty Bed 6/2016 • The Fountain 2/2008
The Fourth Sacrifice 12/2008 • His 6/2015
Instruction Hour 3/2013 • Mercy 4/2008
No Love 3/2008 • Passion 8/2009
The Pier 6/2013 • Rapture 8/2013
Rose Offering 8/2009 • There is Nothing 2009–1/2020
The Window (War) 3/2021 • Loss 7/2014
Besuch / Visitor ca. 1975, translation 9/2022
Schöpfung / Creation ca. 1975, some edits and translation 12/2022
Zeit / Time ca. 1975, translation 08/2022
Grasshopper 9/2023
(Dates of minor later edits are disregarded)

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This version of the collection December 2023
Most stories of this collection are available as free audio recordings:
www.rc-smith.net/audio/

**Do not read this book if you are offended by descriptions
of sexuality and violence.**
Do not read them just for those descriptions, either.

ABOUT

Apart from the short stories and vignettes that you find here I have written a novel (*The Journey*), three stories (*The Island*, *The Courtship Gift* and *The Messenger*), and several essays. You find my writings, and audio recordings of most of them (excluding the novel and the essays) on my website, where you can download them for free.

Within the sections, and with one exception, the stories here are sorted alphabetically according to their titles. It's as good an order as any other I could come up with.

I recommend that you read not more than one story at a time. They are not meant to be read fast. Most of them are sexually explicit and contain scenes of extreme violence. Do not read my stories if this may offend you (you may read *Grasshopper*, though). For all the sex and violence, do not expect my stories to be entertaining.

R. C. Smith

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I

THE MONUMENT

I *had* to torture her, you know. How else could I have won her trust? Yes, I also raped her. We don't call it rape, though. Rape is sex with a woman against her will. A captive enemy commander doesn't have a will. All she has is information, and a body that can be used to get it. Or at least for trying. And for boosting the morale of the population, when they get to see a high-ranking enemy executed. With a good-looking enemy like her, they'd expect a spectacular show. I had to make sure that they got it. But that was still a few days away. Right then, I had just taken over her case.

The Navy had taken her. Her ship had been blown South by a heavy storm, unusual for the season, and blown her right into our hands. Or that was the story they told. I didn't buy it. The crew had been all female. Lower ranks, who didn't know anything. They died at the hands of the Navy officers, within a few days. Days of agony, I suppose, but the reports didn't bother to go into details, they were too unimportant. An all female crew. Whatever the Navy said, that wouldn't have been a military patrol, or expedition. And there were no indications that they were priestesses, on a ritual mission to one of their island sanctuaries. No, knowing their customs, this all female crew could only mean one thing: their mission had been diplomatic. They hadn't been blown off their course, they had *meant* to come to us. They had meant to talk. They hadn't known that there was nothing to talk about. We had already decided upon the war that would destroy them.

I waited a full week before I claimed her. The Princess, they called

her, though I don't think they had any proof that she was from the Queen's family. The Queen tried to ransom her, but our leaders just laughed her off. The Navy boasted they'd make her talk, and what she'd tell would be worth more than whatever the Queen could be willing to offer. I waited, because I knew that the Navy interrogators were professional enough not to kill her, and not to spoil her looks for the public execution. I also knew, no matter what they did to her, she wouldn't talk. I could have told them, but they wouldn't have believed me. And afterwards, they might have asked me how I had known.

I didn't want to draw attention to the fact that I had already been around at the time of the old war. I had encountered members of the Queen's Guard then, I had seen them suffer and seen them die. None of them had ever talked. No point in bringing that up now. There were questions I didn't want to be asked. So the thing to do was to wait, and after one week they were so frustrated with her that they were glad I took her off their hands.

Out of the hands of the Navy, and into the hands of the Army's chief intelligence officer of the Northern Sector. No, not directly into my hands. Not yet. First, I gave her into the hands of our interrogation team. They did what they could, but they didn't get any further with her than the Navy guys had. Of course not. After three days, I told them I'd take over. They respected my wish for privacy, a chief intelligence officer doesn't take off his pants in front of subordinates.

On the outside, she still looked whole enough. Inside, the damage was accumulating. Slowly, I added some more. From days long ago, I knew a few ways to hurt her in ways she hadn't been hurt before. I will not go into details, for it is better if such knowledge will die with me. The pain alone would have killed a weaker woman, not to mention the internal fractures, ruptures and the loss of blood. I waited. With

her hope for diplomacy thwarted, I knew she'd try to come up with something else. She knew she couldn't last very long anymore, and she knew that I was as high up the hierarchy as she could hope to get at. At last, she talked.

It wasn't easy for her to speak intelligibly in her agony, and I did not interrupt her tortures to make it easier for her. She had to talk, and she talked. The fleet would attack in the fall, she said.

At that time of the year, the wind blows from the South. We'd never expect their attack at that time, and we'd never expect an attack from the South, not knowing that for three years they had prepared that expedition, three years in which their fleet had sailed far out onto the void of the ocean, turning south far out of sight of our patrol ships, building hidden bases bristling with ships, troops and supplies on the labyrinthian tropical Southern coasts, to catch us unprepared for an assault from that unexpected direction.

It was a good plan. Had she made it up in her days of agony, or had they prepared it in advance, just in case? We'd have to move our troops South, and to all the vulnerable parts of the coast, and we'd have to put all available resources into the Navy — and, of course, we'd have to cancel the attack across the mountains. I knew it was a lie, of course, because I knew that she had not given in, and she never would. Only vanity might have made me think that I had broken her, but vanity is not among my vices.

I didn't believe it, but, more important, the Navy wouldn't believe it either. They knew better. It didn't matter, though. I hadn't expected her to come up with something useful anyway. But, I had her where I had wanted to have her.

I laughed at her. I told her they had no such plan, I told her we knew their Navy was a mess, as was their Army, and I told her where

we'd attack them, across the mountains, where they didn't expect us, where we knew their forts were crumbling and their garrisons depleted, as was the local population, due to bad harvests and disease. I told her how we'd overrun them, how we'd leave the ground strewn with their dead and dying on our way to the capital, how we'd subjugate them once and for all, and how nothing could stop us, certainly not her attempt at deception. Then I slapped her face for lying to me, told her all the gory details of the execution that I had helped plan for her on the next day, and raped her one last time, for goodbye.

The execution of the Northern "Princess" was a huge spectacle. The Prince was there with his concubines, as were the ministers, and the top ranks of the military. And, of course, a crowd of ten thousand or more, and the crowd of those who served them, offering beverages and food, and, not strictly legal but quite openly, sexual services.

It was a glaring hot summer day. She was a stunning sight — a strong body, full breasts, long black hair, and a noble face that showed contempt for her tormentors. She didn't scream when the stake entered her vagina, nor when it pierced her entrails, nor when it splintered her right collar bone where it exited. Agony now showed in her face next to the contempt, but it only enhanced her beauty. She still didn't scream when red hot pincers ripped apart her thighs. When one of her breasts was gone, and she still bore the pain in silent contempt, I began to worry. She couldn't last long anymore, now. Was she overplaying her hand?

When the pincers dug into her other breast, she finally made her sacrifice. It was the greatest sacrifice she could possibly make, or ever have made. Her honor. She finally screamed.

Having held out so long had been a foolish display of pride, a dead giveaway that she was still in control, but nobody else noticed. Not

the jeering crowd, not the fools on the seats of honor. What did they know about their enemy? Nothing. For them, her scream was their victory. They had grudgingly paid respect to her strength, but only on the premise that she'd finally break. Now they delighted in seeing her broken, in having their expectations fulfilled. Now she could die, without stealing a triumph from them.

Fools.

Her screams, only interrupted by her struggles to take in air, were loud and wailing, emphasizing her defeat at the skills of her executioner. Nobody noticed the sacrifice she made, except for two people. One of them, of course, was me. The other one I spotted immediately when her screaming began. At the edge of the crowd, a nondescript elderly woman with a horse-drawn cart, on which she offered ale out of several barrels. She stood next to the horse, when it suddenly shied. The cart toppled, spilling the ale. I was too far away to hear, but her gestures showed that she cursed the horse, the bystanders, the dying woman, and her own bad luck. Then, her business having come to an end, she put the cart back on its wheels, and drove off, still cursing, and being cursed by some bystanders whose pants and shoes had gotten drenched in ale.

As a cover for her sudden departure, it was a far too conspicuous maneuver. I held my breath, but nothing happened. Lack of competence, on both sides. The woman got away, with the message that only she had understood, with an urgency she hadn't been prepared for. I only knew there had *been* a message, in those screams. I knew there was a code, though I couldn't read it. I knew what the message was, of course. It had come from me, after all.

So, you see, I had to torture and rape her, to make her believe me. Had I told her I was on her side, she'd never have trusted any infor-

mation I'd have given her. She would have suspected that I assumed she'd find a way to pass it on, and therefore she'd never have done so. But when I had proven to be her enemy, when I gloated over her helplessness, her pain, and her impending harrowing death, when I stupidly tried to complete her humiliation by letting her know about the destruction that her country faced after her death, *that* she could believe.

She died in shame, humiliating herself before her enemies, sacrificing her honor for her country, not knowing that I had deceived her. Not knowing that I had deceived her into believing the truth.

The rest you know. I went to the North, into the mountains with the attack force. Unexpectedly, they found themselves expected. Many died, on both sides, but your lines of defense held. Some of our troops retreated before winter made the mountains impassable, some of them perished in the cold, some went into captivity, I among them.

I am grateful that you will not ask me for information that does not concern her fate, and which I am not willing to give. I would have liked to learn her name before I die, but I understand that you refuse it to me. I have heard my sentence, for what I have done to her. Fittingly, my death will match hers. I welcome death, for after what I have done, I could neither live with my own people, nor with yours. I will die screaming, but my screams will not carry a secret message. All I have to say I have already said.

Her mission to prevent the war has failed, but her death has not been in vain. The war has stalled. Maybe there will be negotiations now, maybe there will be a truce. And maybe, one day, when I will long be forgotten, on the place where she has suffered and died, people will look in peace at a monument erected in her honor. Thank you.

THE MOUNTAIN FARM

I have seen the farm, from the distance, on one of my mountain hikes. I could have gone there, walking down on one side of the valley, crossing the brook at its bottom, climbing up the slope on the other side — the border is not guarded, it is hardly marked, I could have gone there and been back and still reached my destination long before dark, but what would have been the use?

I took the the water bottle and a piece of bread out of my back pack, sat down on the trunk of a conveniently fallen tree, and took in the view.

The landscape was the same as on this side of the valley, hilly and wooded, with large grass-covered clearings. The high mountains were some distance off, but already here the slopes were so steep that the only feasible kind of husbandry was raising livestock.

My resting place was a few hundred feet higher than the farm, so I looked down upon it, across the valley. Had I not broken my binoculars the day before, I could have seen more clearly, but even so it was obvious that it was still the same idyllic place that it must have been those years ago. I saw the main building, the stables, the sheds, and the dozen or so one-room cabins which they rented out to tourists. I could not see the chickens and the pigs, but I made out the sheep, and the cows, peacefully grazing on the steep meadows, lazily letting their calves nurse from their udders. I also saw the humans, tiny distant naked figures, their genders just discernible, busily going about their chores.

I have never stayed at that farm, nor at any other one of its kind. This is another man's story, not mine. Or you might say it is the girl's story.

~

She wasn't his type at all. A strangely shapeless chubby body, with a pinkish complexion, hardly a waistline, and a vulva that seemed nothing more than a short and narrow groove disappearing between her thighs. Drooping breasts, with large pale areolas and flat, barely visible nipples. Short hair, of a nondescript brownish shade. A nice face, though, with round eyes and soft lips.

He could have asked for another girl to do his room, a girl more to his tastes. Slim, petite, bronze-skinned, black-haired, with an enticing mons, perky little breasts, and readily erect dark nipples. They had one at the farm, he had seen her when he arrived, working in the vegetable garden. He had seen others, too, whom he had found attractive. He didn't feel it was worth the effort, though. And besides, the girl was clean, soft and warm, smelled good, talked little, and, as he had heard that all farm girls did, she knew how to please a man with her fingers and her mouth. Or with her mouth only, when he tied her wrists behind her back, or to the bedposts, which he always did when he wanted to use her vagina.

She probably knew how to please women, too. She even offered to teach him, in case there was a woman in his life, or there might be one later, whom he wanted to please. He hadn't come to learn, though, he had come to forget.

He usually saw her in the mornings, when she brought his breakfast to his room. All home-made stuff, organically grown, this was one of the farm's main attractions — there were others, too, of course. None

of them particularly appealed to him, for him it was the remoteness of this place, and the surroundings, the solitude he found there, which had brought him here. He took his time eating — the bread, the butter, the ham, the sausages, the cheese, the eggs — a copious meal that had to last him through the day. She waited, standing, silent and naked, until he had finished, when he either sent her away, or used her mouth, breasts or vagina for his satisfaction, sometimes hurting her, but never badly.

After breakfast and sex he cleaned himself, got dressed, and then he left, for his long solitary mountain hikes. That summer was an endless stretch of warm and sunny days, but I think he would have gone in the cold, rain, and storm, too. His breakfast, plus whatever fruits of the wood he came by, sustained him, and springs were easily found where he could refill his water bottle. He never took part in any of the activities on the farm, not in the ones for children, of course, but also not in the other ones. He almost never returned before nightfall, soon after his arrival able to walk the paths back to the farm even in the dark, and immediately went to his cottage.

Dinner waited for him in his room — bread and meat from the farm, only the wine was brought in from a warmer province. The meals were cold, but he didn't mind. Pork, lamb, poultry, and, occasionally, that other meat. He didn't pay much attention to what he ate, he ate for nourishment, not for culinary delight.

Usually he ate alone, but on some days he called for the girl. One day his money would run out, but for now he could still afford the little extra fee. When he sought company, it was always she he asked for. He liked her silent unexciting naked presence.

When she was there, he always took off his clothes, though he did not always touch her. Sometimes he masturbated while eating, slowly,

without even looking at her, not even calling her to clean him when he was done.

He never offered her any of his food — I do not know if he would have done it had she been hungry, but she was obviously fed well enough. For a reason, he thought as he looked at the curves and folds of her meaty body, his gaze finally coming to rest on the narrow slit between her thighs.

She read his mind, or maybe she just read his gaze, which wasn't that hard to read.

“Maybe I will live,” she said.

Life on the farm was idyllic. Death, for a farm girl, was not, and still isn't. What they call a “traditional feast” goes on for hours, and she stays alive through most of them.

There had already been two or three feasts while he had stayed at the farm, and he had been invited to join, for tradition has it that feasts at a farm are open to all the guests. He had declined politely, but curtly. He had no intention to mingle, neither with the farmer family nor with the tourists. And besides, these were not his feasts, he had nothing to celebrate, and taking part would only have rubbed that in. On the nights of the feasts, he stayed off the farm until the screams of the girl and soon afterwards the laughter of the guests that rang over the hills had fallen silent.

To his own surprise, he had been glad each time when the girl brought him his breakfast on the mornings after the feasts, so that he knew it hadn't been she who had died, and that the slice of leftover meat on the breakfast tray wasn't from her.

Looking at the slit between her thighs now, he could not help thinking about the spit, though.

“Maybe I will live,” she said. The farmer couple liked her, and their children liked her, too. Next year, she was to start breeding. There wasn’t much breeding done on the farm, it wasn’t efficient, it was cheaper to buy farm girls at the market, but a traditional farm needed some kids. They had good lives, and played with the farmers’ children, and with those of the tourists. Then, as long as she worked hard and well, she’d be allowed to stay with her kid until its third birthday, and by then, she might easily have another one, and then a next one. One day, she knew, she wouldn’t be useful anymore, but that day might still be a long time off, and then, many years from now, death would be painless and quick, without the hours of agony that it needed for a farm girl to die at a feast. It was the advantage of looking plain, of not attracting the attention of the guests.

He did not reply, but he kissed her on the mouth, and, surprised at the intensity of his arousal, relieved himself into her vagina.

It was the first time she had spoken about herself or about the farm, the first time she had said anything to him but wishing him a good morning, asking for his requests, or thanking him for allowing her to serve him. It would remain the only time.

For him, as for her, life went on as before, only that the days slowly grew shorter, and week by week more guests left the farm than new ones arrived. His daily wanderings still took him to the woods, the hilltops, the mountain peaks ...

There was a particular peak, not too far from the farm, which he visited often. From an exposed rock, it offered a magnificent view over a seemingly endless, sparsely inhabited countryside. Next to this rock, a perpendicular precipice fell down several hundred feet, to a bed of large broken boulders at its bottom. Sometimes he sat there for hours, before he got up and returned to the farm.

The nights were getting longer, and colder. Was it for warmth, or for company, that often now he kept her in his bed when he went to sleep? A soft plush toy offering comfort, her regular breathing soothing him into sleep, her hand warm and gentle on his spent penis.

But how long could he go on like that? He had gone to the farm as a temporary refuge — it was not a place where he could possibly stay, even if there was no place that he wanted to go to.

He returned late that evening, from the lofty vantage point above the precipice.

She was waiting for him, warm, naked and quiet, with his dinner and with a letter that had arrived for him during the day. He opened it after he had undressed, and eaten his meal.

It was from a friend — a friend he hadn't thought he still had. I cannot go into details here — these are his private affairs, and they have to stay private — but there had been a quarrel, or a misunderstanding, which had set him apart from his friends, and now they wanted to apologize, and to make up. Yes, there also was a woman involved, and she wanted to make up, too. Hadn't he had his birthday a few weeks ago? They wanted to see him, to give a feast for him, and wasn't he staying at a perfect place for a feast?

It was Thursday evening now. His friends would arrive late on Friday evening, not to the farm, but to a mountain inn an hour and a half away. The woman would be with them. They'd be at the farm at noon, for the feast to begin, and return to their inn before dark. On Sunday, if he wanted to, he could join them for their trip back home.

He had tears in his eyes when he had read the letter.

“Yes,” he said, though they couldn't hear him, only the girl heard him.

He didn't care for the feast, it was they who wanted it, not him, but it was *for* him, and he accepted it gladly.

They would pay for it, they had written. The farm, he knew, had all they needed, even on a short notice — he'd tell the farmer couple the next morning.

All he had to do was to choose a girl who would die.

She looked at him, and they both *knew*.

~

This, basically, is the end of the story. If you want to know how she died, read one of the many accounts of traditional farm feasts in books and stories — being strong and healthy, she lasted long.

That evening, she walked out of his cabin, and he didn't try to hold her back. Next morning, with eyes red and swollen, she brought him his breakfast and served him with her mouth. It was the last time they were together — he walked over to the inn in the evening, to greet his friends, and stayed there for the night. When they arrived at the farm, Saturday noon, she had already been made ready for the feast, and it were other farm girls, pretty and skilled, who took care of the diners' needs.

But, as I have said, I have not been there, not then, and not since. I have only sat on the trunk of a fallen tree, many years later, eating my bread, looking over to the other side of the valley, and enjoying the scenery, its beauty, its tranquility, and the tales it has to tell.

THE PROMISE

“You have lied to me, have you not?”

It was not a question, but his voice betrayed not so much anger but surprise.

Yes, I had lied when I had told him to hide under the bales of straw because I was not allowed to entertain a visitor in my cabin.

Who would have cared?

And if they had, what could it possibly have meant to me now?

It was the second time that I had lied to him, but he didn't know it yet. He would, soon. It had been those four weeks ago, the first morning after he had arrived, in the darkness, in the night, in the thunderstorm, coming up that steep and narrow and half-forgotten path, only the flashes of lightning showing him the way, when it had been a miracle that the storm and the pouring rain had not wiped him off the scarp and to his death.

“I have slept soundly and without dreams, for the first time in months,” he had said, when he had woken up long after the sun had risen, after I had given him a warm meal in the evening, after I had hung his wet clothes in front of the fire to dry them, after our first love-making.

“The thin air up here made you sleep,” I had said to him, before we made love again. I had not told him about the herbs I had put into his tea.

In the following weeks we made love often, though love-making probably isn't the right word. There was no love involved, certainly not on his side. I was his to be used, a soft feminine body, open to his

desires, and he used me, in the usual ways, and in others. He never hurt me, though, not badly, not so that I couldn't do my work. He liked to watch me when I worked, outside, with the animals, or in the cabin. Naked — he liked to see my body, and he liked to see my bruises — unless it was too cold, when he told me to get dressed, before I even noticed that I had goose pimples all over. Sometimes he helped me with my work, sometimes we went on walks, though he didn't like to go far, but most of the time he kept to himself, content to watch me, and to use me when he felt the need. And I, did I love him? But what do I know about love, what do I care? All that I needed to know was that he had come.

A huge surge of anticipation made me shiver, and I was glad he didn't notice.

That time, our first morning, I had lied to him because I had not wanted him to know what I then already knew. I had not wanted him to know that I had searched his knapsack and read his diary during the night. He never suspected it. He didn't even know that I could read, I think.

This time, before the two boys had come to drive the flock down to the valley that I had tended over the summer, I had lied to him because I did not want to embarrass him.

“Hide, because they might remember your face, when my dead body will be found” — how could I have said this to him?

They were gone now, we were alone again.

Some time during the last weeks I had shown him the path across the mountains, to the South.

“How long before the snow will make it impassable?” he asked.

I looked at the sky, I felt the air. “A week,” I said, “at the most.”

He nodded.

“You will not take me with you,” I said. It was not a question, just an acknowledgment of an obvious fact, and there was no need for him to reply.

“I have to make everything ready for the winter,” I said after a while, to end the silence. “It will take a few days, but if you help me, we can do it faster, and then there will be more time for ... for ...” My voice failed me. “For what you will do.” There, I had said it. “Time,” I added. “Days ...”

It was then that he realized that I knew.

That I had always known.

What had I expected he would do now, or say? Would he savor the moment, or would it make him feel awkward? Would he be kind to me, or be cruel? Would he cast down his eyes, or look into mine? Would he be strong, would he be brave ... as strong and as brave as I was? Though was I strong and brave, when I relied on him so much? No, it was for him to be strong and brave — did he understand how much I needed him?

He did not look at me when he spoke. “No,” he said. “No, you are mistaken.”

I felt as if he had hit me. Spat at me. Thrown me into a cold void, a freezing abyss, a pitch-black nothingness.

“But the diary,” I said, wondering that I could even speak, not sure, and not caring, whether my words could actually be heard. Maybe he didn’t need to hear them, to know what they were. “The girl you have killed, before you came to me. Like the others before. Tortured her for days. Broke her bones, cut off her fingers, her toes, her breasts, her labia, her lips ... skinned her ... cut out her eyes ... raped her ... sliced off her meat ... cooked and ate it ... why? why? why her ... why not me?” I started to cry, and I cried so hard that, had he said

anything, I would not have heard him — I cried, and I longed for him to touch me, to hold me, to punch me, to kick me — anything — but he didn't, and there came the moment when through the dark fog of my despair I realized that I had stopped crying.

All through my crying, he hadn't moved. He hadn't left me, at least this he hadn't done. When he thought I was able to listen, he spoke again.

“It's not my diary. It's not my handwriting. If I had a pencil, I could prove it to you.” It was true, I hadn't found a pencil among his possessions. I didn't have one, either — but even if I had, he could disguise his handwriting, couldn't he? I didn't want him to prove it, did I? I didn't want it proved. I wanted it to be a lie. I had lied to him, why shouldn't he lie to me?

“I took it from a man whom I killed,” he said, answering a question I had not asked. “This, and his boots, and the knife.” I had seen the knife, too, that first night — the one in his knapsack, not the one that he used during the days. The one with the shiny blade, double-edged, and the smooth polished wooden haft — I had seen it, and taken it, and pressed it against my skin — moved it all over my body, naked, shuddering from its cold touch, from its glaring heat — on my breasts, my belly, my thighs, between my legs — I had kissed it, cutting my tongue on its sharp edge, tasting my blood — then I had wiped it clean and put it back, knowing it was there for me — meant for me — as *he* was — soon — *now* ...

“I better go now,” he said. Over the mountain. South. Away. Leaving me abandoned, alone with my pain, my need, my hopeless thoughts. “I'm sorry.” Sorry for what? For not being who I had thought he was? Or for his weakness, his lie, his deceit? I would never know.

I thought of asking him to leave me the knife, even though I knew

that without him it would just be a dead keepsake, without power to hurt and to heal, but I was too afraid he'd deny me that, too. "Go, then," I said, and lay down on the cot, on my side, facing the wall, away from him. I heard him move, and for a moment I expected him to come to me, after all, but then I realized that he put on his coat, and picked up his knapsack, and walked towards the door. Before he closed it behind him, he said something, but he was already half through it, and there was the sound of the wind blowing in, and I had started to cry again, so I could not make out the words, and when I asked him, silently, crying, to repeat them, he was already gone.

I lay there for a long time, waiting, but he did not return.

I got up, and washed my face in the cold water, and made everything ready for the winter, then I began my descent down into the valley, which I reached before the snow fell. I had the strength for this, I had the strength to get up again, because, you know, as I lay there I had listened to his parting words in my head, over and over again, straining my ears, shutting out all the other sounds, the wind, my crying, until there was only his voice that I heard, clearly now, each single word. Two words only, they were. Next year, he had said.

One more year. If next year really is what he had said. If he will remember it. If he will be able to make it. It will be a long year, to wait, and to hope. But after all these years, hope for him is all I have, isn't it?

RED FEATHERS

They do not like me, and I am sure they are aware that the feeling is mutual. I am not like the other girls who work here. I am friendly, and I smile, but I do not laugh at their jokes. Most of the time I do not even understand them. Still, they have no reason to complain. I take their orders, and bring them their drinks and what passes for food here. My breasts are not as big as some of the other girls', but I wear the same uniform as they do, so the guests have something to look at, apart from my face. I am not good at reminding them of the "look, not touch" rule without getting rude and inviting rudeness in return, but I manage. I have to remind them, because the owner has only bought a drink and food license, not a "drink and play" one, or whatever it is called, so she'd get in trouble if the serving girls misbehaved. I do not want trouble, not for me, not for her, so I behave.

Sometimes, when business allows me to relax, I look at the guests, and watch them when they look at me, or at the other girls, and I try to imagine what their thoughts are, their desires — if they could, what would they do with us? To us? What would they do to me? I imagine all kinds of things ... and I ask myself, do they know what I am thinking? And do we think the same?

It is just a game in my mind, though. Nasty incidents are rare. Since I've started to work here, there's been only one. There are candles on the tables, which provide what illumination there is, and a guy, for no reason, blew out the candle in front of him. Cathy took it and re-lit it and put it back in front of him, and he blew it out again. When Cathy lit it again, he said, so you want it to burn, and she said yes,

politely enough. He was a big and heavy man, but he moved swiftly. He got up, gripped Cathy with his left arm around her back and arms, took the burning candle in his right hand, and held the flame to Cathy's nipple.

He was big and heavy, and he moved swiftly, but he knew nothing about fighting. It was easy to break his right arm. I have to give it to him, he didn't flinch. He let go of Cathy, and drew a knife with his left hand, so I kicked his feet from under him and broke his left arm, too. That he hit the corner of the table with his face when he fell and broke his jaw and a few teeth was just luck. He hadn't been one of the regulars, and he never showed up again.

The guests cheered me, because Cathy had been quite popular with them — her nipple was badly burned, though, and wasn't a pretty sight anymore even after it healed, and she had to quit her job. They cheered me that night, but we didn't become friends. And the girls, some of whom had previously tried to befriend me, now all keep their distance. I've seen them exchange glances and heard them whisper behind my back. They wondered why I had waited so long, as it seemed to them, before I had come to Cathy's rescue, why I had stood there — for how long? — as the flame consumed her nipple, as she was grimacing with pain, not daring to move, not making a sound. They never said anything to me, though. I've heard the owner come to my defense — “It's not as if any of *you* have done anything but stand there, frightened and shocked, and stare, have you?” she said to them. “Nor any of the men.” For seconds, for an eternity, all had been frozen in a silent tableau. “Without her,” she went on — meaning me — “who knows what else he might have done, you should be grateful to her.” But they aren't. That night, they've seen something in my eyes, and it has frightened them. I know, because sometimes it frightens me, too.

I work long hours. My shift begins at noon, and I'm the one who stays behind after everyone else has left, around midnight, to tidy things up and get the place ready for the cleaners who come in the morning, before I lock the doors and walk home. It's a position of trust, and I have it because I've come with good credentials — almost a bit too good. The owner had raised her eyebrows when she'd seen them, and asked me why I wanted to work in such a lowly and remote place, for such a low wage. I wanted something quiet, I replied, and I liked the scenery, the beach, the ocean. And that I hoped for good tips. She didn't say I wouldn't get them, but she didn't have to say it, I had known it anyway.

The bar is the only building at the little bay with its sandy beach. It's a half hour walk to the small town, first along the shore, then across a little wooded promontory, and then down to the town and the harbor. From there, it's not far to the house in which I stay. I like the walk, both in the daylight hustle, and in the solitude and darkness of the night.

It has been a long day, I look forward to getting home, wash, and fall into my bed. I step outside. There is no moon tonight, but as always there are the torches, still burning, their yellow flames bright in the darkness. I lock the door, and pick up the little lantern which I need for my walk on a moonless night. To my one side is the dark ocean, to the other side, some 300 feet away, parallel to the shore beyond the reach of the light, are the skirts of the even darker wood. Wind and water are still, there is no sound.

There is no sound to warn me. When I hear them, it is too late.

Three men attack me, who had waited for me, hidden behind the building, at the side facing away from the town, where there are no windows and no torches. By the flickering light of the flames,

I recognize them — I've seen them in the bar, I had noticed the way they looked at me. Once, in the town, near the harbor, I have seen them with the man who had burned Cathy. I have no chance against them. I put up some token resistance, but it only makes them more violent. They rip off my clothes, punch my face and my breasts, throw me to the ground, humiliate me, spit at me, beat me, kick me, hurt me, rape me, in my mouth, my vagina, my ass. I do not know how long this goes on, I lose all sense of time, I lose sense of everything except the all encompassing pain.

The torches still burn, though now lower. Trying to fight against the darkness that enfolds me, I strain to open my eyes. Blood blurs my sight, but I see the man who kneels on my chest, who bends over me, who starts to choke me. He means business, I see it in his eyes, in the light reflected from the pale sand on which I lie, he is killing me. I cannot breathe, my blood pounds in my ears, I can hardly hear the laughter of the other two, and now it gets black before my eyes ... There is a thud, the man's grip around my throat loosens, he makes an awful croaking sound, there is an arrow straight through his neck.

He falls off me and lies by my side, dead. The arrow through his neck almost touches my face. I recognize its red feathers. Of course I do.

Two more thuds, two more dead men. I slowly and laboriously regain my breath.

Alison comes running across the sand, from the wood's dark edge, two of her girls close behind her, all three of them armed.

"Are you all right?" she asks, out of breath, worried.

"A good shot," I say hoarsely, my throat still hurting. As, of course, was to be expected from her. Not for nothing is she a commander of the royal body guard. "You took your time, though."

“I am sorry, my Princess,” she says. “Last time you had me whipped for having shot too early.”

“Only lightly,” I reply, “and don’t tell me you hadn’t liked it!”

I look for a smile, but her expression is grave. “I am concerned about you,” she says.

“Why?” I ask. “Are your archery skills in decline?”

For a moment, I think she is going to give me a sharp reply, but she checks herself.

“You know what I mean,” she says. She tries to read my eyes, but fails. “You always say you know that I am following you, but each time, you make it more difficult for me. You get really good at it, you know. This time, it took me long to find you, almost too long. What if next time it will be too long?”

“You don’t have to worry,” I say. “You will not be held responsible, I’ve seen to that.”

Her face darkens. “There is no need for you to deliberately hurt me,” she says.

“I am sorry,” I say, and there is a moment of silence between us.

“Can I ask you not to go on those ... adventures anymore?”

I am still lying on the ground. I had looked up to her, now I lower my eyes.

“Can I ask you, at least, *please*, to promise me not to try to shake me off from now on?”

I want to answer her, but my voice fails me. I silently shake my head.

“You are bleeding,” she says, “and dirty all over. We need to go inside and clean you and dress your wounds. Can you get up and walk?”

I think of shaking my head again and let her lift me up and carry

me like a child, but then I realize she wouldn't do it, she would order the two girls to carry me. I fight back nausea and pain as she helps me to my knees. More help from her, lifting me with both arms, and I stand. She lets go of me, and I manage to stay on my feet. She looks at me, and I am aware of my nakedness.

“I love you, you know,” she says, and with a soft cloth that appears in her hand out of nowhere she wipes the dirt and the blood and the tears from my face.

“I know,” I say, and now she smiles, and puts her arms around me, and strokes my hair, and I close my eyes as we kiss.

THE SCENT OF ROAST

It was sheer luck that I received the news at all. But so late! Why did I have to hear of it so late?

Catherine was going to burn on Sunday morning. She would burn in Earstham, and to Earstham it was a good 30 miles, the last 10 miles of them across the mountain. And now it was Saturday evening.

So late! Too late!

Or was it?

Was there a slight chance that I could make it?

By a fortunate coincidence, I had worked late into the night the day before, and had rested in the afternoon. And another fortunate coincidence, we had a clear sky, and the moon was almost full. It would rise soon after sunset. It was summer, the night would not be long, and neither would it be cold. If I started now, not losing any more time, and with a horse that took me to the foot of the mountain, I might make it.

I did not have a horse. My horse had died a few months ago, and I had not yet bought a new one. It had not seemed necessary.

I took my neighbor's horse. I could not ask him, as he was not home. I knew where he was, at a lady's house, but it would have taken too long to go there. We were not friends, hardly on speaking terms, anyway. I was fortunate that he had two horses, one was for me now. I left him a note.

I could only hope he would not have me hanged as a horse thief. It did not matter.

Catherine! How long had it been? It did not matter either. All that mattered was that I got to Earstham before the mass ended. That would be 9 in the morning. That was when the executioner would begin his work. It would be slow work, I knew.

And it would have to be a fast ride.

It was long after midnight when I got to the foot of the mountain. There was a hostel at the end of the road, where the mule trail began. All the windows were dark, and the door was locked. I wouldn't have had time for a rest, anyway. I tethered the horse, assuming it would be cared for in the morning. With luck, I would be able to pick it up on my way back. Luck. I needed more luck than that now.

The trail was steep, and not easy to walk even in the daylight, and when you could take your time. I had only the moon, and I had to hurry. I was exhausted when I reached the mountain's ridge, and I hurt from several falls. On the way down the muscles of my legs began to hurt. Half way down, dawn broke, and soon afterwards I spotted Earstham in the distance, in the plain below.

I heard the bells that told the mass had ended when I had reached the outskirts of the little town.

When I reached the market square, Catherine already stood on the scaffold, next to the executioner, next to the nine foot stake. She wore a simple gray linen gown, so different from the fine clothes she had been so fond of. Her hair was still long, loose and brown, as I remembered it.

As I started to push through the crowd, she took off her gown, and handed it to the executioner. Was it an act of defiance, or an act of obedience? I could not tell. She was naked underneath.

She had never undressed for me, but for him she had done it now. For him, and for all the others.

Her body was lean, her breasts were round and firm, her crotch was shaved. Her belly and her thighs were marked by dense patterns of red stripes. She was a truly beautiful sight. A collective sigh of appreciation arose from the crowd.

I pushed on.

She stretched up her arms, and the executioner, stepping on a stool, shackled her wrists to the chains that hung from the top of the stake, then he chained her waist and ankles to it.

She stood still, looking into the distance, above the heads of the spectators, when the executioner took the pincers from the brazier. He had two pairs of pincers, small and large ones. He started with the small ones. He also had a poker.

I was only sixty feet away from her, when the red hot iron bit into her left breast. She screamed, and now she struggled against the chains, but they held her tight. The iron ripped out a small chunk of her breast. A little blood from the wound colored her thighs.

Her screaming stopped, but her face showed her pain and anguish, and tears flowed from her eyes.

The executioner put the pincers back into the fire, and waited. He was a strong man, with a heavy chest and bare brawny arms. Besides being the executioner, maybe he also was a blacksmith. His face was hooded, but his mouth showed, and he smiled.

Content with the pincers' red glow, he picked them up again.

Fingers dug into my arm. A young woman was standing next to me, grabbing me. "Kind sir," she said. She was slim, with dark hair and dark eyes. Despite the warmth of the summer day she wore a thick woolen cardigan. Despite the warm cloth, she shivered.

"Kind stranger," she said, "please!"

I do not know whether she said more, as Catherine's scream drowned out all other sounds. This time, the hot irons had touched, squeezed and scorched her nipple.

The girl grabbed my arm so hard now that I emitted a low scream of pain myself.

"Kind sir," she said, again, and I felt her body press against me. I put my arm around her, and by itself my hand found one of her breasts, and now my fingers dug into her soft flesh, as the executioner's pincers played their game of burning and tearing on the chained woman's breasts.

I felt her hand upon mine, holding it firmly. Her nipple rubbed hard against my palm.

"Please," she said, and then after a while, her body still firmly pressing against mine, "she will die."

"Yes," I said.

"Please say it," she said, "kind sir, please say it!"

"She will die," I said.

She was breathing hard. As the glowing forceps closed in on their target between the bound woman's thighs, she took my hand and put it between hers. Through the fabric of her gown, underneath her cardigan's hem, I pressed my fingers against the soft folds of her sex.

When her orgasm came, she pressed her face against my shoulder. The screams from the scaffold reached a new height.

"Say it again, please," she said.

"She will die," I said.

She died slowly, not before her breasts had been ripped from her chest, her flesh had been ripped from her thighs, arms and shoulders, and the hot iron had explored her orifices and burned her from within, and then taken out her eyes.

Only then did the executioner stack up the straw and the wood around her, and set it on fire.

She died slowly, but finally the work was done, and her screams subsided. I looked at the church clock. It was not yet noon.

The girl took out a handkerchief and wiped the sweat and some drool off her face.

“How do I look?” she said.

“Fine,” I said. I felt an impulse to kiss her, but hesitated. “May I invite you to have lunch with me?” I asked her.

She smiled, a warm and happy smile. “Thank you, kind stranger, for your offer, but I have to decline. My husband would not be pleased.”

Her husband. I could not help the pang of disappointment I felt.

“Your husband, he has not come with you?”

“Oh no,” she replied. “My husband does not share my ... pleasure ... in those things ...” She made a short pause. “But he accepts it. He does not understand it, but he knows my need. And he is happy for me, when I ...” She did not finish the sentence.

“And you love him?” I asked. It was a stupid question, born out of a futile desire to hear her say “no.”

“I would not hesitate to suffer as she has,” she said, pointing in the direction of the scaffold. “To suffer like her, or worse, if it were for his sake. I would not hesitate for a moment. That is how much I love him.”

Her face, that had been pensive for a moment, lightened up in a radiant smile again. “Come with me,” she said, “and have your lunch. He owns the best inn in town, you know! I will ask him to give you of the best meat, and the best wine!”

Seeing that I hesitated, she took my arm and pulled me along. “*Come on!* It is still early, but the cook will already be in, and you look

as if you were hungry enough! Come on!” She laughed, and I gave up my resistance. She led me through narrow streets.

“You look as if you might need a bed, too, after you’ve eaten! We have rooms at the inn — they’ve all been occupied last night, because of the burning, but now there’ll be enough beds empty so that you can have one for yourself.”

“I’ll pay for it,” I said.

“Of course you will, otherwise he’d throw you out!” Her voice was bright and merry. “But I’ll tell him to make you a good price!”

The thought of a bed suddenly made me feel my fatigue, and I yawned.

“O my,” she said, “you *really* need a bed!”

“I rode and walked through the night, across the mountain,” I replied. “I am not so young anymore that I don’t feel the exhaustion.”

“You must have really been eager to come,” she said. “Had you known her?”

“Yes,” I said. I thought of saying more, but did not know how. And what did it matter?

“It must have been hard to cross the mountain at night?”

“Yes,” I replied again.

“So much had you wanted to see her die?” There was a new tone in her voice now — was it curiosity, or fascination?

“Wanted to see her die?” I said. “Oh no. Not to see her die ... I have with me this royal affidavit. It is old, but it is still valid. I have kept it, all those years. I had lost her, I never knew where she was. And now, when I heard ... It was late, but there still was a chance ... I came here to *save* her, you know.” My voice broke.

“Hush,” she said. “Don’t cry.” With the sleeve of her woolen cardigan she wiped away a few tears from my face. It was a strong but

soft wool, and equally strong and soft was her touch. “It’s all right,” she said. “It’s all right.”

I took her hand. “Yes,” I said, “thank you!” From one of the houses came the scent of fresh roast; it made me aware of how hungry I was. “It isn’t far to that inn of yours anymore, I hope?”

THE WITCH

To have a witch in your town is a dangerous situation. You cannot let her go. You cannot keep her locked up for long, she'll find a way to harm you. You cannot risk to have her seduce the wardens, the magistrate, or even the judge — she is a good-looking woman, after all, even now, lying naked on a heap of straw, cold and hungry, dirty and bruised, chained to the dungeon wall. You cannot put her to death, without proof of her guilt. You cannot have proof without her confession. Only pain will make her confess, only pain will make her name the other witches she knows, only pain, pain that goes beyond the limits of what she can bear, can prove her innocence, if innocent she should be. But no one, high or low in the hierarchy of justice, is allowed to harm her, beyond keeping her restrained. The judge will have to find her guilty, the executioner will have to end her life, quickly or slowly, according to the judge's findings, but, until then, only the torturer has the right to cause her pain, as only the leech has the right to administer medicine to the sick, and only the priest has the right to give benedictions to the fallible. And against a witch, neither medicine nor benedictions will help. But, suddenly and unexpectedly, when he was needed most, the torturer has died. Maybe he died from a heart attack, or maybe he fell down the stairs of his house in a drunken stupor and broke his neck, but now he is dead, and the town is in dire need of a replacement, and has sent a petition to the court, stressing the urgency, asking for the appointment of a new torturer. He will be sent to them soon, they were relieved to be told, carrying a letter with the Queen's seal as his credentials.

Hunger had driven the boy to pluck a fruit from a tree, but it had been the wrong tree, standing on the wrong side of a fence, and now he is on the run. If they catch him, he knows he will be dead. He hides during the days, he stumbles along during the nights. He is not really a boy anymore, he is a young man, but he is shy, he has kept to himself for as long as he can remember, he feels uncertain about the ways of the world. He knows he must keep moving, but he knows he has no hope of finding safety. He will not be forgiven nor forgot, there will always be a reward on his head that will far exceed the value of any fruits he may ever have stolen, and he will always stand out, always raise suspicion, as someone who has no business being there, wherever he may go.

He follows an overgrown former footpath near the bottom of a ravine, where high above him the paved road precariously clings to the slope. Dark clouds fill the narrow gap of sky between the mountain ridges, then thunder rolls through the canyon, and heavy rain begins to pour down. He finds shelter in a small cave, just a recess in the rock, only a few yards deep but enough to protect him. A flash of lightening is followed by a deafening thunderclap, and then, his ears still ringing with that sound, some strange noises he cannot identify, then the deluge drowns out their echo. After a while, as swiftly as the thunderstorm and the pouring rain had arrived, they end. He comes out of the cave, to see not far away from him, below, splayed out on a rock and half immersed in the water of the now swollen stream, the broken remnants of a carriage, with two dead horses, in their harnesses, lying next to it.

Carefully, so not to fall into the stream, he approaches, sees the

body of the coachman, and then, among the debris, three more bodies, the passengers who have died with the horses and the coachman. An elderly man, an elderly woman — from their clothes they seem to have been well off, but he shies away from the thought of searching for the possessions they might have carried with them. And the body of a young man, not much older than himself. For a short and eerie moment, when he looks at the dead man, he has the feeling of looking into a mirror, before he realizes that the semblance is very superficial at best, and more about the build of their bodies than the features of their faces. Still, he cannot dismiss this young man, as he had dismissed the other dead, human and equine, as not concerning him. There is a bag with a strap around the corpse's neck, made of leather, and tightly closed. He takes it and opens it, and finds in it, protected in its own thin leather pouch, the paper with the royal seal, stating its owner's name, destination, and appointment.

It is the idea of a moment. He takes off the dead man's clothes and boots — still better than his own, even though they are now torn, dirtied and soaked — and exchanges them for his own. He stuffs the pouch with the paper into a pocket of his new clothes — he takes the bag, but only to dispose of it somewhere where it will not be found, he does not want to take more from the dead than he needs to take. He drags the body, now in his own old clothes, the few feet to the river's edge, he throws it in, he watches as it gets carried away by the water. Even if it will not get carried far, in this wilderness it will take some time before it will be found, and by then, he hopes, it will not be recognizable. Not be recognizable as the dead body of the man who now begins the arduous ascent to the road above, and the long walk towards the town that he hopes will welcome him.

It is already evening when he arrives at the town. He presents the crumpled letter of credentials to the guards at the town gate, who express their joy at his arrival. On foot, without a purse, without even a small bundle of his possessions, dirty and in torn clothes, he explains that he has been robbed, but the bandits had spared his life. It happens. They understand his need for rest, the mayor gets informed of his arrival but all business can wait until tomorrow — the official introduction into his office, the long overdue first torture of the captive woman, of the witch. They lead him to his new home, the house that has always been the torturer's residence. The house is close to the town wall, dark, small and old, simply furnished, but better by far than any place he had ever called a home before, and for a long time now there hadn't even been any such place. There is a room for him with a bed, there is food, there are candles, and there is a girl, who comes with the house. She has already served the old torturer. She had not rejoiced at his death. He had beaten her and raped her, often when drunk, sometimes when sober, but most of the time he had not paid her much attention, had left her doing her job, to keep the house clean, his clothes mended, and his meals prepared. It could have been worse, and when he died she knew that with a new master, it might well be.

And now, by the light of a single candle, for candles are expensive, this young man, this boy, sits with her in the kitchen, silent and shy, and, obviously, in great distress. Two guards had brought him here, he had looked more like a prisoner walking between them than like an agent of the law, they had knocked at the door and she had let him in, and had shown him his room, which she had diligently cleaned and prepared for its new lord whenever he might arrive, where he had no

luggage with him to put into the wardrobe or the chest of drawers, and she had apologized for not having hot water ready for him to wash, as she hadn't known that he would arrive today, but he said cold water would do, and she had brought it and filled it into the washstand, and then had gone to fire the kitchen stove, which she had not used during her solitary stay in the house, as firewood was expensive, too, and not for her to use for her own comfort. So, now she waits for the water to boil, to cook a simple meal, potatoes and vegetables and some herbs and even a few scraps of pickled meat, and he conceals from her his hunger as best as he can, but he cannot conceal his shyness, and his distress.

And she, finding him so different from what she had feared her new master to be, from what she had expected him to be, feels kindness towards him, and asks him if there was anything, besides the obvious, which he may want from her.

"No," he says, "just a meal, and then I'll wait until midnight, climb the town wall, jump into the moat, swim across, and be on my way."

"But *why*?" she asks. He does not reply. "The witch ..." she says, "do you fear that she might ... harm you?"

"No," he says, "not that. I do not believe in witchcraft." Is he fully aware of how dangerous an admission this is to make?

"But why, then?" she asks, and there is something in her voice, a gentleness, a genuine concern, that makes him forget all caution, and so he tells her his story.

And, he tells her, he has never been with a woman, never seen a naked woman from close up, let alone ever hurt one. Inevitably, this will show, they will become suspicious, they will find him out, he will be dead. He had thought he could hide here for a while, a few days at

least, to rest from running. He had not known a witch would already be waiting for him, to be his undoing. He cannot stay for even a night.

A pleasant heat is radiating from the stove. The water has begun to boil, she puts in the ingredients, keeps standing to slowly stir the pot from time to time, dispersing wafts of steam and kitchen scents. No one had ever talked to her like this boy had, with such openness and trust, and with such need for her help. How could she deny it to him?

“It will be all right,” she says. “Have supper, now. And then ...” She takes off her gown, the single piece of garment that she wears, and stands before him naked. “Don’t be afraid,” she says. “Don’t be afraid to look at me. Don’t be afraid to touch me ... and ...” For a moment her voice falters, but then she speaks on. “Am I not a woman, and don’t we have the whole night, for you to learn? I don’t bear pain well, but the walls are thick ... don’t be afraid to hurt me ... I will show you how ...”

II

THE GOATHERD

This is a story that I have dreamed. Seriously. During the night from April 24 to 25, 2017. I have embellished the dream here, added some color, worked on the language, but the core of this story is what I have dreamed.

For inspiration, the dream is clearly indebted to Turandot, Penelope, Pirate Jenny, the brothers Grimm, and many others. My thanks to you all!

~

The King has died, leaving his daughter as his only heir.

She had ruled together with him.

The law says, the King's, or the Queen's, throne and life have to be shared. Now that the King has died, his daughter rules in his name, but she cannot be the Queen, until she has found the one to be her consort.

The King has left his bow in her possession. Maybe it was he who had declared it, before his death, or maybe it had been she herself, but the word has been spread, that the one who proves to be able to draw the old King's bow, will be the one to live and reign with her.

From near and far, men have come to try to win the prize. Princes, warriors, commoners — strong and courageous men, all of them, but not even the strongest of them has even come close to drawing the bow. When they fail, of course, they have to die.

What they do not know (and does the King's daughter know it?), is that the King hadn't been able to draw this bow, either — he had it

made and strung for this purpose, heavy, sturdy, from the hardest and most unbendable wood, so that no mortal can draw it.

So, men come, young men, old men, men in the prime of their years, and the King's daughter watches, as they try, and fail, and die.

Then comes the girl.

Everybody had *assumed* that only men could apply, but, nowhere had this actually been said, or written.

So, at the day of the week, at the time of day, assigned for suitors to take up the challenge, with her dark eyes and her ragged clothes, she enters the palace.

They question her, as they had questioned those before her, in the palace's central court, where the King's daughter, the courtiers, the servants, and many of the citizens and also visitors to the town have assembled.

What is your name?

— They call me you, there.

What is your profession?

— I am a goatherd.

Where are your goats?

— They have been killed during the war last year, to feed the soldiers.

What do you live on, then?

— From alms that people give me, when I please them.

Why have you come?

— To make an end of it.

Then they bring the bow, and place it before her, one of the guards

holds it in his outstretched hand, one end resting on the ground, the other end as high as his head.

You can still go away, they tell her, but only now.

I want a favor, she says. I want the King's daughter to hold the bow, instead of the guard.

There is a murmur from the crowd, at this unheard-of request. They all look at the King's daughter, as she stands up, walks down from the dais where she had been seated, to the center of the court where the bow, the guard, and the shepherd girl are, and they watch as, without a word, she takes the bow out of the guard's hand, and holds it, standing erect, with arm outstretched, as he had done. Less strong and less tall than he, she still holds the bow steady, in a firm grip.

She looks at the girl before her, who had come to make an end of it.

"Now draw the bow, or die," she says. She feels sad, there had been so many deaths.

The girl, instead of taking the bow, takes two steps back. The crowd gasps, the palace guards grip their swords, but the King's daughter does not yet move, nor does she give a sign. Then the girl stops, kneels down, and from a pocket of her gown takes out a rolled up blank sheet of paper, which she unrolls, and a pencil. She puts the paper on the ground before her, and with the pencil she draws the King's daughter, and the bow, as she holds it.

~

"Why have you come so late?" the King's daughter, now the Queen, asks her, after she had led her into the privacy of her chamber. "So many have died."

"I had wanted to see them die," the girl says. "I had wanted to be worthy of being your companion."

And the Queen takes her in her arms, and kisses her, and rips off the girl's clothes, and her own, and, unheeding of the sounds of celebrations from the crowd outside, drawing each other's blood with their finger nails and teeth, they sink into each other's embrace.

PLUCKING ROSES

In the garden of the Prince's summer palace, about an hour's ride out of town, a man and a girl are walking hand in hand. After a while, they sit down on a bench opposite a large bed of roses, and admire the flowers.

She points to a sign that says, "Picking of flowers prohibited — six whiplashes for each plucked rose!"

"Isn't that a rather cruel punishment?" she asks.

"Oh, it's not about cruelty, it is about beauty," he says.

"Have you ever watched a whipping here?" she asks him.

"No, I have not," he says. "It is supposed to be done on that old stone terrace with the two marble pillars, by the swan lake in front of the old castle, next to that little grove of chestnut trees, with the victim stripped bare and tied between the pillars. But, who would pluck one of the roses for this price?"

"Still, you would want to see it done, if you could?" she asks.

"They'd use a heavy whip," he says. "With a beautiful girl, it would be a very memorable event."

She looks around, and sees two guards standing by the fountain next to the stone lion. She starts to sing a happy melody — her voice, soft and clear, carries easily across the distance. The guards turn their heads and look at her. Still singing, she gets off the bench, walks the few steps across the path, and kneels down at the edge of the grass, lifting up the hem of her light summer dress to keep it from getting soiled. When she gets up again and lightly brushes the dirt off her

knees with her left hand, she has finished her song. She looks at him, and she smiles.

In her right hand, she holds three red roses.

TEACHING

In this dream, I am a teacher.

I write a sentence on the blackboard: “If it pleases my Master, I will suffer willingly.”

“Now,” I ask the class, “one of you has written this in his or her homework. Who can tell me what the two grave faults are in this sentence?”

A girl stands up and says, “It says Master, but it should also say Mistress!”

“That’s true,” I answer, “but this is not what I had wanted to hear — 20 lashes, after the class!”

She thanks me — at least this she knows — and sits down. Silence from the rest of the class.

“Now, this can’t be *that* difficult?” I ask them.

Still no reply. Oh my god, haven’t they learned *anything*?

“Now listen,” I say, “there’s a flaw in each of the two parts of the sentence. *If* it pleases my Master — now, you can *not* impose conditions for anything, can you? *If* it pleases — do you think that your Master might have to explain himself to you? That you have a *right* to know whether anything pleases him or not? What insolence! And then the second part: ... I will suffer *willingly*. Now, what is that supposed to mean? Willingly? What *will* are you talking about? You do not *have* a will, other than your Master’s. Is that clear?”

Silence.

“Is that clear?” I ask again.

“Yes, Master,” they say.

“Stand up,” I say to a petite dark-haired girl with nicely erect nipples. I take the whip in my hand. “Are you willing to receive 30 lashes?”

“If it pleases you, Master,” she says.

Oh my *god!* I wipe the sweat from my brows — teaching can be *quite* a frustrating experience!

III

ACROSS THE RIVER

They wouldn't come before dawn, which is at 6 am, and so I slept until 4, before I got up. Two hours will suffice, to wash, and to do my hair, shave my armpits and my crotch, apply my makeup, paint my toenails and my fingernails ... I want to look my best, when they come.

They are still on the other side of the river. I know they won't come before dawn, because my brother had told me. My younger brother, that is. They have their orders, and he knows about them. He knows them, for he has fought them for many weeks, and he will go on fighting them, on this side of the river now.

"We can't take you with us," he had said to me, yesterday evening, before he left. Of course they couldn't. Not with the chain between my ankles. I can only walk slowly, making small steps, and they have to move fast. My brother — my older brother — has given me this chain, after I had tried to run away from him once too often.

On each ankle there's a padlock, and only he has the keys. *Had* the keys — he is dead now, of course. They all are dead, except the few who could flee, and those who still fight.

Where is he now, my dead brother? Into which ditch have they thrown his naked body, his penis cut off, his eyes gouged out? They do worse things with the women, they say. Well, soon I will know ...

Where are the keys to my padlocks? A moot question, but I wonder. Has he thrown them away long ago, seeing no reason ever to unlock my chain? Are they lying in the same ditch as he is? Or have they found them in his clothes when they captured him? Does their commander have them, and know them for what they are, and is he

now looking for the girl they would set free, and when he finds her will he take her to his castle and marry her? I laugh at my own idea.

It is almost dawn now, they will be here soon. I look into the bathroom mirror — yes, my hair, my makeup, they are all right. I put on a simple white dress. With that chain, I cannot put on panties, and so I do not put on a bra either — it would look ridiculous, wouldn't it? — so, just the dress, one single piece of clothing, easily disposed of. It makes me look innocent and young, I have always liked that dress ...

I sit down in the living room. The house is clean, I have cleaned it yesterday, until late in the evening. The bed, in which I have slept for the last time, is made. All there is left to do now is wait. I had thought I might read a book, or listen to some music, but now I just sit and wait, quietly, listening for the sounds of their approach.

Soon they will be here. It will be my first time, you know. My brothers have only used my ass and my mouth — the family honor demanding I stayed a virgin. So, I am a virgin now, still intact.

Be gentle, I will tell them, when they enter the house. Be gentle with your hands and feet, with your bayonets and boots, with your truncheons and your flares, with your flesh, your steel, and your fire.

Be gentle, I will say, and they will laugh.

I can hear them crossing the river now.

THE BASEMENT

Death, for him, came unexpected, and instantly. A heavy truck, ignoring a stop sign, ripped the light motor bike and its rider to shreds, on a country road not far from the apartment at the edge of town, where he had lived. For her, death took much longer. In the darkness, in the basement of the old house that he had owned, isolated, at the edge of a large wood, an hour and a half away on his bike, she did not die from thirst, for there was a water-tap on one of the walls, and a drain on the ground underneath of it, nor did she die from asphyxiation, for there was an air shaft that led to the roof, but air and water are not the only things one needs to live, and eventually, she died of hunger.

It was weeks after his death before anyone set their foot into the house, a woman who worked for the notary who handled the legacy. She noticed that the house was well furnished and looked lived in, it looked as if he had spent at least as much time here as in his apartment in the town. There were clothes that must have been his. There was food — bread had gone moldy, fruits had started to rot, but the kitchen was well stocked with non-perishable provisions, and most of what was in the fridge would still be edible. On a table stood the dried up and mildewed remnants of what must have been a sumptuous cake, half eaten, which might have been fresh on the day before his death.

The house held no surprises, but there was this door which, since it neither led to another room nor to the roof, had to lead to a basement. It was a heavy door, with a safety lock to which she did not have a key, and it fit tightly. There was no way she could open it, so she returned a few days later, with a locksmith. When they finally got it

open, a wave of stench almost took their breaths away, but with their noses covered with pieces of cloth, and after a little accommodation, they felt ready to go in — the locksmith, his work done, stayed to join her from a mix of curiosity and chivalry. It was dark inside, but the light switch next to the door, on the outside, worked, and a bare light bulb illuminated the equally bare room that lay at the bottom of a flight of stairs.

The girl, the young woman, lying on the ground in an almost peaceful position, was clearly dead. Her thin naked body was covered in marks — whip marks, burn marks, welts, cuts and bruises. The autopsy, later, would find broken bones, damages to her breasts, her vulva and her vagina, and a lot of other injuries, in different stages of healing. None of them had caused her death, though — starvation had.

Of all this, the woman and the locksmith only took in a short, horrified first impression, before they turned back, to call the police. They waited outside the house — the locksmith, now a witness at a crime scene, had to wait with her — but then, something made them go back in, something they had seen, but which had not fully registered. It was, of course, for the police to investigate the house, but, curiosity edged them on. That door ... On the outside, it had a door knob. You needed the key to open the door — turn the key to the left, pull the knob. When you closed the door, it fell into the lock. On the inside, on the basement side, though, there was a handle. No keyhole. They tried the handle, with the open door. Then they hesitated, but they felt they had to know. He stayed outside — he knew now how to open it, if he had to — she drew a deep breath, and then she went in. He closed the door. She waited, as long as she could hold her breath, then she pressed down the handle. They looked at each other, through the open door, in mutual incomprehension.

This was what would keep haunting her, much more than the body of the dead girl. It did not make any sense, did it? But in some nights, when, once again, she could not find sleep, she sometimes thought that, maybe, she understood.

THE EMPTY BED

She was the lowest of the slave girls. She was there to be available to everyone, male or female, to satisfy their sexual urges whatever those might be, and to vent their frustrations on, in whatever ways might please them. Available, without protection, not only to the members of the court, and to visiting dignitaries, but also to the free servants, and even to the higher ranks among the slaves.

Most of the times when he visited her, he found her bleeding and in tears. Each time he visited, he found her covered in bruises and welts. There wasn't a moment when she wasn't in pain. She was there to suffer, to be hurt and abused, there was no other purpose to which she was kept alive. Yet he loved her as if she were a Queen. Yet he visited her whenever he could, and, after a while, she looked forward to his rare visits. When he wasn't with her, he thought of her often. When, one day, he found her cut and torn up beyond repair, he didn't even try to hold back his tears. He cradled her in his arms, careful not to cause her additional pain, and stayed with her, covered in her blood, while life and agonizing pain slowly seeped out of her broken body.

"Do not cry," she said, her voice betraying the effort it cost her to speak. "This is what happens to the likes of me."

Weeping, he gave no reply.

"You could have saved me, couldn't you?" she asked, looking up at him with eyes still dark and deep.

Silently, he nodded.

"But if you had saved me, you couldn't have loved me anymore."

Hardly perceptibly, he shook his head. In the faint flickering light

of the only candle she probably couldn't even see it, but it hadn't been a question, she hadn't needed the confirmation.

“It is good, then, that you haven't,” she said.

He stayed with her until she died. Naked, her dried blood all over him, past midnight, he walked up the stairs and through the long dimly lit corridors of the palace, back to the royal chambers, to fall into the royal bed in which he would always be alone.

THE FOUNTAIN

For at least an hour the path, still passing through the wood, had been leading along a high stone wall, a few thicket-filled yards to my right. I knew that behind this wall had to be the castle gardens, and somewhere the castle itself, but neither sight nor sound gave anything away about their existence. Not even treetops could be seen behind the wall, and no birds could be heard from the other side.

The road led gently upwards. To my left, the ground was equally gently sloping down, but the wood was too dense to allow a view of the valley that might have lain below, or the landscape beyond. After having walked along the wall for maybe half an hour, I came to a place where the uniformity of the wood and the wall was broken thrice.

First, in the wall there was a small door. It was a solid door, and it had no handle to open it from the outside. I did not have to try it to know that it was locked.

Then, to my left, maybe thirty feet away from the wall, there was a small fountain, a rock with a metal pipe in it, from which a stream of clear water flowed into a stone basin that was about one foot deep, two feet wide and four feet long; from the basin, a rivulet flowed down, away from the path, deeper into the wood.

And third, down the path of the rivulet, just visible through the trees, was a glade, with a small wooden hut in it. I smelled a whiff of smoke before I saw the smoke coming out of the hut's chimney. It brought with it a delightful scent of roast meat that made me aware of my hunger. I carried some food with me, but I also carried some coins, and I decided to ask whoever lived there if for a fair price they would

let me join their meal. Before I went, I knelt down next to the fountain and drank from its cold, fresh water.

It was a solitary old man who lived in the hut. He offered me his hospitality, and he even refused to take my money — he had all he needed, he said, and food was plenty.

There was nothing unusual in his hut, with one exception, a surprising sight in the middle of a wood: one wall was covered with drawings. All the drawings were done in black and white, and they all showed women, sometimes only their faces, sometimes also their bodies — they were all naked. All the women were pretty, though some looked tired, or worn out, but some had an expression of quiet and peace on their faces that made their beauty stand out from the others.

“Have you drawn those?” I asked.

“It is what I am here for,” he said.

“Who are those women?” I asked, curious, “where do you meet them?”

“Where I meet them? Well, here of course, I never leave this place. And who they are? Who they’ve been before I do not know, but when they come here, through that door in the wall, they are the Prince’s discharged concubines.”

“He sends them to you?” I asked, incredulously.

“Oh no,” the old man said, “he has them sent through that door. And there is only one thing that they are told: that, when they have stepped through the door, they will know what to do.”

“What is it?” I asked.

“You do not know?” he asked back, “you do not understand? Well, some of them do not understand, either.”

“What is it that they do, or are supposed to do?” I asked again.

“They are not *supposed*,” he said. “They just understand. But, not all of them do. Some just drink from the fountain, and walk away. Sometimes, when the night is very quiet, and the air carries sound far, I can hear their screams from the valley. Or maybe I just imagine them,” he added after a while.

“And the others?”

“Some come to my hut.” There was a pause. The meal was ready now, and we sat down to eat. The meat tasted as delicious as it had smelled, and the wine that the old man poured from a jar was strong and dry.

“I bury them at the other end of the glade,” the old man finally said.

For a while we ate in silence. The meat was unknown to me. Perhaps some wild animal from the wood? I thought. A different thought crossed my mind, too, but I did not ask. Some things need not to be talked about.

“But there are still others?” I asked.

“Oh yes,” the man said. “There are those who *think* they understand. They drown themselves at the fountain. It is not easy to drown yourself in such a small basin, in only one foot of water, some of them struggle for quite a while ...”

“And this still is not the right thing for them to do?”

“It is not about right or wrong,” the old man replied. “But when they had really loved the Prince, and when they had truly understood about love, they do not drown themselves. They lie down next to the fountain, and there they die of thirst.”

I looked at the drawings again. “And *they* — these are the beautiful ones?” I asked.

“It may be that I just draw them more beautifully,” he said.

We drank some more of the wine.

There was a mirror on another wall, and in it I could see myself. I was not as beautiful as those other women had been. Only love can evoke such beauty.

“How can I meet the Prince?” I asked.

THE FOURTH SACRIFICE

I was tired and hungry when I finally reached the little town in the valley that I had seen from some distance, walking down one of the hills that surrounded it, hoping to find a place where I could eat and rest, alms given me either out of charity or in return for what little I had to offer — my body, which, of course, I had no means to save from being taken for free, and my skills in making it provide pleasure, which, when I was lucky, were rewarded by a friendly word, a small gift, or a bowl of hot soup with some meat in it.

I had hoped for this, but I found my hopes disappointed in a curious way: there was no one around to take what I had or to give what I needed; the town seemed to be empty, devoid of all its occupants.

I wandered through empty narrow streets, at first thinking that some disaster had struck, that the inhabitants had died of a strange disease or fled a mysterious danger, but I saw no signs of any disturbances, all seemed to be normal, doors and ground floor windows were locked, some windows at second or third floors were open, from some chimneys smoke was rising steadily into the calm blue spring sky ... no signs of any people, though ... and then I heard distant singing.

I followed the sound of the voices, feeling a strange urgency to reach their source as I hastened through the labyrinthine streets until, turning one more corner, I came to a huge square that was packed with people, all the town's inhabitants must have gathered here. The singing had stopped, and all was silent, no one talked, everybody looked straight ahead, towards the square's other end, in expectance of an event that I knew nothing about.

Slowly I moved through the crowd, in the direction in which everyone was looking, people making room for me to let me pass, until I had reached a point from where I could see an odd structure — for some reason, the word sanctuary came to my mind. As the square from here on sloped down in that direction, I could see it quite clearly over the crowd's heads.

There was a row of four pillars, made of white stone, maybe twelve feet high, some eight feet apart, and in front of each pillar was a stone table, and upon each table an object lay: from left to right a large knife, a smaller knife, a small knife, and a sword.

And to each of the first three pillars a young woman was tied, naked, facing the congregation.

The lips of the three women were moving, but I could not hear them, maybe they were speaking silent prayers.

I found myself standing next to a man, who, different from the others who had just made room to let me pass, looked at me attentively. He was a handsome man, tall, strong, with an honest and knowing face. Before I could check my words, I asked him, whisperingly, "What is going on here?"

He showed no surprise, neither at my ignorance nor at my daring to ask him. "Today is the day of our annual sacrifice."

"Sacrifice?" I asked.

"The first one will give a hand, the second one a breast, the third one an eye," he said.

I shuddered, but I also felt an unexpected fascination.

"When will they begin?" I asked, still whispering.

"When the fourth sacrifice comes forth," he said. "They cannot begin without her."

"The fourth sacrifice?"

“She will have to complete the offerings,” he said. “She will give what the others give, and then she has to give her life.”

“Her life?” I replied, disingenuously.

“The sword will enter her twice, first from below, through her vagina, then from the front, through her navel,” he said. “She will die slowly, and she will die in pain, to honor her obligation, and ours.”

Horror and a strange foreboding made my knees weak.

“Who ... when ...?” I stammered.

“Other than the other three girls, who have been chosen, she has to volunteer,” he said.

“But if ...”

“If not? Then there will be no ceremony, and we will all go home again, and try to cope with the consequences.”

“I have no home to go to,” I said.

“Of course not,” he replied.

A murmur rose from the crowd, as a figure dressed in a hooded gold brocade ceremonial garb, walked up to the sanctuary, faced the crowd, and stood still. I could not tell whether it was a man or a woman.

“The ceremony will soon begin now,” the man next to me said.

“But ... who ...?”

“Don’t you know it?” he said. “Do you really not know?”

I trembled. I wanted to say “No!” but my voice failed me. I could hardly move nor breathe. All I could do was nod my head.

And the crowd parted, opening a path in front of me, and they all looked at me with awe and expectation, and the man reached out his hands, and I understood and took off my clothes and handed them to him, and I silently thanked god that I had not neglected to wash and to shave, and then I walked towards the sanctuary, and up the few steps

of a pedestal that I had not seen from the distance, and went to each of the bound girls and looked into their terrified eyes and kissed their quivering mouths, and took each of the knives and kissed them and put them back, and did the same with the sword, and then I stood in front of the fourth pillar, and stretched out my arms for my elbows to be tied behind me, I did not see by whom, pressing my back against the smooth stone, and the hooded figure came forward, I saw now that it was a man, and his eyes rested upon me, as did the eyes of the other sacrifices, and the eyes of all who were assembled here and depended upon me, and I returned all their gazes, and I knew they were expecting me to say the right words so the ceremony could proceed, and say them now, and into the expectant silence I spoke them, I said “Thank you,” and I smiled, and the first sacrifice’s screams rang out, and then the second one chimed in, and the third, and then a fourth screaming voice joined them, which was my own, as the blades started to cut me, all three knives one after the other, cutting my wrists, my breasts, my eyes, and in the darkness I opened my legs, and I felt how the sword entered me, and withdrew and entered me again, and I thought about how I had come to this town only in hope of a bowl of hot soup, and how much I was given instead, and I was happy because I knew that all was well, now.

His

Yes, yes, yes, oh yes.

What else could I say but yes, feeling his body pressing against mine, from behind, feeling his arms around me, his hands gripping me, his breath, his lips and his teeth hot on my neck, his voice so close to my ears.

Yes.

His hand cupped my breast and squeezed it, forcefully, painfully, his fingers digging into my flesh, his nails scratching my skin.

Harder, I moaned.

His grip loosened. A reminder that it was not for me to command him.

Are you mine? he asked.

Yes, I whispered.

Speak louder, he said, his hand gone. Are you mine?

Yes, oh yes.

I was on fire. I was melting. His hand returned to my breast, covered my ruby-hard nipple. My own hand, on its own, moved between my legs.

He took hold of it, and moved it away, gently, but firmly. He took one of my fingers, and bent it back.

No, he said, no. You are mine, not your own. Do you understand?

The pressure that bent my finger back increased.

Yes, I said. Yes. I understand.

You won't forget again? he asked.

No, I said, never, I swear.

Good, he said. His breath on my neck was almost as hot as the fire within me.

The finger bent, until it broke with a piercing welcome pain.

I'm yours, I said. Thank you for letting me be yours. His arms held me tight.

Will you do what I ask of you? he whispered in my ear.

The heat in me was unbearable, the fire spread through my whole body, and through my mind. There were tears in my eyes.

Yes, I said, I will.

Whatever it is?

His hand moved closer to where mine had been. Closer, not yet touching the core of my heat.

Yes. Yes.

If I ask for your life?

A first tentative touch, then his finger withdrew. It took all my effort not to move, not to cry out.

Yes, I said. Yes, my life, if you want it.

And if I want less?

His finger circled my clit. My body screamed for me to do the forbidden, to thrust myself against his hand.

Yes, I said, whatever you want.

If I want your blood?

Yes, my blood. Yes. Please, please, please was all I could think.

His finger lightly touched my thigh now. Please, please, please, please.

If I want your eyes?

His finger moved along my swollen labia.

Please. Yes. Please. Yes. Yes.

All right then, he said. Give them to me.

A small pen-knife was in my hand. His finger paused. I screamed. I was his.

And that was it. He hadn't made any promises, had he?

I have never seen him again.

I will never see anything again.

But he has left me his knife, I still have it. It still cuts.

INSTRUCTION HOUR

It's always the same. The girls are different each time, of course, but since they are only here to listen, this doesn't make much difference. To them, it does, but not to me, the one they have to listen to. Only for about an hour, just some words to make them acquainted with their new situation. Sometimes there is a new group two or three times a day, sometimes once every few days. Usually about a dozen girls, but that number varies, too. And so do their looks — body types, hair and skin color — and probably their origins. It depends on the season, on the market, on the wars and on politics ...

In the beginning, I had cared — I had looked into their eyes, I had looked at their naked bodies, trying to read them for signs of what went on in their minds — little signs, necessarily, as they were standing with their ankles bound with short ropes between them, their hands tied behind their backs, and under strict orders not to move and not to make any sounds. I still look at their faces and their bodies, of course — where else would I look in this barren hall? — but I have lost interest in them, in who they had been, and what they were about to become, and what it made them think or feel ...

Most of them would soon be dead, anyway. Or they'd wish they were dead. I was there to tell them.

We don't *train* them — we are responsible for their looks, and their physical health, but not for their skills, or their minds. We wouldn't even *have* to tell them what I'm telling them, but we found that it made things easier, both for them and for their buyers. Or maybe it just

makes things easier for us, by scaring them into more manageable behavior, the short time they stay on our premises.

You'll not be sold as *toys*, but as *slaves*, I tell them. Toys cannot do anything wrong. Toys are just played with. It is easy for them — they just suffer and die.

You will suffer, too, and die, but not so quickly. And as long as you live, you will have a *duty* to serve your owners. All you have is this duty, you have no rights. When you do something wrong, you will be punished. When you do something right, no matter how hard it is, you will not be rewarded. And right or wrong are only for your owner to decide.

There are obvious rules, I tell them. You will do whatever you are ordered to do. You will not do *anything* you've not been ordered to do, with the exception of breathing, but even that is a privilege that can be revoked. And, most important, you will never flinch.

And then I give them the example that I use to make them understand. When your owner tells you to take the pot from the oven, I say to them, then you take it. No matter how hot it is. When you are ordered to take it, its weight or its temperature are not your concern. And then you hold it, until you are told to put it down. And when it has been so hot that in putting it down you rip the burned skin off your hands and it is now sticking to the pot's surface, then expect to be punished for damaging your owner's property.

It's a stupid example to give, but it does give them an idea of what they'll have to face, and how they'll have to face it. At least I hope it does. Or I used to hope it, when I still cared. I tell them a bit more of the same, I watch their reactions, out of habit — some look horrified, some cry, some look as if they were close to fainting, and some are even aroused — I can see their slightly parted lips, their stiff nipples and

swollen labia. Will it be easier for them than for the others? Or will they be treated more severely? I do not know, I never know what becomes of any of them. I only know that, sooner or later, their buyers return to buy new ones.

My speech is done. I turn away, I do not look at them as they awkwardly but silently hobble out of the small hall, back to their quarters, where they will receive final preparations before the auction. I do not look at the open door through which they go, through which a fresh breeze of air comes in and the sound of birds can now be heard. I do not look at the scarred palms of my hands, either.

MERCY

I walk down the street that leads from the temple to the main square. I have spent the night at the temple, alone.

I am naked, and I am shaven, body and head. I am cold, the morning sun has not yet warmed the air and the stones.

At this time of the morning, the street I am walking is usually a very busy place — men, women, children, doing business, strolling, playing, talking, watching, laughing — a bustle of life, to be seen, and heard, and shared ...

Today, though, the street is empty, the windows and their shutters are closed, I am the only living being here, and I am walking towards my death. Silently, as my bare feet make no sounds upon the stones of the pavement.

Behind the closed windows some people are inside their homes, not looking out to see me pass, but most of those who live here, or anywhere else in the town, are out on the main square, waiting for me.

~

I reach the square now, it is at the center of the town. There are stone buildings all around it, and between them eight gates lead onto the square.

I enter it from the upper side — the square is not level, it is sloping towards the opposite side, where the town hall stands. This way, from where I come, I can survey it all, above the heads of the crowd that fills it.

I have a good view at the stone tribune in front of the town hall,

with the spiked statue of the Goddess on it, with all the implements of torture that await me, with the big gong, and with the torturer, dressed in his traditional hooded black garb, standing solemnly, looking like a statue himself.

I feel a trace of pity for him — he will have to stand like this for many hours, through the heat of the noon, until by some sign that I do not know he will discern that the time has come, and then he will strike the gong and call me to him.

Even as a child each year I had wondered how a man can stand almost motionless for so many hours, and then do his work, for many hours more.

Maybe the Goddess gives him the strength that he needs.

As I hope she will give it to me.

~

They have seen me now, as I stand at the gate. The crowd is dense, there are thousands of people, men and women, it is not easy to move among them, but when I enter the square they make room for me, and I walk towards the center, where the fountain is.

They all touch me with their eyes, looking at my nakedness, at the shame of my involuntarily erect nipples and blossoming lower lips, but they do not touch me with their hands or their bodies.

Not yet. It is for me to take the first step.

There is a man. I know him. He had been our neighbor when I was a child, his son and I had played together.

“Have mercy, please,” I say. “Please save me, sir!”

He hesitates.

“Save me, please,” I repeat, “or, at least, have the mercy to give me a quick death!”

I kneel down in front of him, look up at his face, and say “Please!” once more.

He opens his pants and draws out his penis, that quickly becomes erect.

When I’m done, a girl about my age puts her hand between my legs.

“Please, lady, save me!” I say.

She inserts two fingers into my vagina, then she presses the nail of her thumb into my clit.

Soon her fingers are replaced by another penis. Hands grope me, fingers pinch, nails grate, teeth bite into my breasts. They do not draw blood, this will be the privilege of the man in the black garb.

“Please, save me, have mercy,” I say.

I know that no matter how often I will ask for mercy, of how many I will ask it from, I will not receive it.

~

The hours go by. I am in pain, and I am exhausted — the last three days I had fasted, and today all the food that I get is sperm, but I can drink water from the fountain, and the worst of the noon heat is now over — I look forward to when it will all be over for me, before the night.

~

There is this man, the clothes he wears show that he is a stranger, and his expression shows a strange confusion of emotions. I have noticed him for a while now; he is following me, but he is not getting closer to me — I try to avoid him. But, he pushes on, and as he can move freely while most of the time I can not, he is finally standing before me now.

I ask him to save me, as I ask all.

“I was told not to interfere,” he says.

“Then do not,” I want to reply, but what I say is “Please!”

“How could anyone save you?” he asks. “How could I save you?”

Before I can answer, a woman tells him: “By taking her hand and walking out of the square with her, of course.”

“This is all?” he asks.

“Yes,” I reply truthfully, as I know I must.

He takes my hand, and we walk away, towards one of the gates, through it, down an empty road. We rest after we have left the walls of the town behind us.

I cannot stop crying. I should be a good slave to him, but I am not, my misery is overwhelming me.

How can I live with this horrible shame? Why can I not die from it?

How can I live with the knowledge of the doom I may have brought to those who had trusted me, live with the wrath of the Goddess who has been betrayed of her sacrifice?

How can I be a good slave to the man who has done this harm to me, and to all of us?

How can he expect me to ever stop crying?

Why had nobody told him, why had he not seen for himself?

He does not understand, and I cannot explain it to him.

I keep crying, and he leaves me. I cannot go back, it is too late. I lie down, and hope to die. What a useless death it now will be.

I hear footsteps approaching, and look up — through the tears in my eyes I see the torturer’s black garb.

“Come,” he says. “The fire has been lit, and in its smoke, the statue of the Goddess has shed a tear. The Goddess has forgiven you, if you are willing to return.”

I kiss his feet, and he reaches out his hand and helps me to get up, and the late afternoon sun falls upon his face and shows the ardent beauty of his dark eyes.

We walk back to the town, and I am happy again.

No Love

They come for us soon after sunrise, and fetch us from our separate cells. As executions always last until sundown, we know we face a slow and painful death. We had known it before, of course.

He looks at my naked body, which he had not seen for weeks now. Like his own, it is marked by torture, though not as much. Not yet.

“At least we die united in our love,” he says to me, as we are led off.

“But I do not love you,” I say.

“But ... you have *seduced* me! You have been so passionate, and so persistent ... you made me make love to you, though we both knew it was forbidden, and though we knew we would die if he ever found out. For your love I accepted this risk, and now you tell me that you do not love me at all?”

“I never said I did,” I reply.

“But then, *why* ...?”

What useless talk this is. “Upon his orders, of course.”

“He *ordered* you? But *why*?”

“Because he was suspicious of your loyalty. He had to make sure whether he could trust you, and I was given the honor of being the tool to test you.”

“I really thought you loved me,” he says.

Oh my god, do we really have to go through all this? “Well, I *liked* you, in a way,” I reply.

“And he surprised us ...” He does not finish the sentence.

“... because I told him where we would meet,” I say.

“So you have done your work well,” he says, with bitterness in his voice, “and only I will die today.”

“Don’t fear,” I say, “I will die too.”

“For what? You only followed his orders?” he asks.

“But I succeeded in compromising a guard’s loyalty. He could never trust me again, after that, could he?”

“And you *knew* ...?”

“Of course I knew. He would never have been dishonest with me.”

“So we will die together, after all,” he says, and smiles.

“No,” I tell him, “we will die both, but not together. He will give me the honor to watch me die. You won’t suffer less, but in some dark corner, on your own — he really doesn’t care for the sight of the likes of you.”

“But ...”

One of the guards turns around, slaps my face so that I start bleeding, and says “Shut up, both of you.” I am glad that he does, there is really nothing more to say now.

PASSION

“Hurt her!”

How often had I heard him say those words! As always, his voice sounded casual and detached, did not convey the passion that drove him.

Or, rather, the passion wasn't yet there when he said it — only the memories of passion past, the promise of passion to rise within his body, to stir him, to drive his own pain from his tormented mind. Only then his now half-closed eyes would open wide, his teeth would part to let the tip of his tongue wet his lips, his ears would start to pick up all the nuances of sound, his nostrils would take in the scents, his now limp penis would stand erect to its full size, his breathing would become faster, his face would light up in this intense glow of passion that I loved so much to see, that I loved so much to help to bring about.

“Hurt her!”

How often had I obeyed this command!

How much pain had I made those girls suffer who had been helplessly strapped to this iron frame, how many hours had I denied them the deaths that they had soon begun to long and scream and cry and beg and plead for.

How gladly had I helped him to achieve these hours of satisfaction that he desired!

“You show no pity for those wenches,” he had once said to me, half wonderingly, half acknowledgingly, after one had died a particularly slow and painful death.

Pity?

How could I have *pitied* them?

Envy was what I felt.

Envy of the attention they received from him, envy of their much more central role than mine in letting him find the peace he craved.

It was *them* he needed, it was *their* bodies he used, it was *their* meat that found its way to his table — I was just the tool he used to soften them up, to get them out of their shells, to make them consumable to him.

And he relied upon me. He never told me what to do, how to torture them, he always left it up to me and I did my best to never disappoint him.

But I grew tired, and I grew older, and while at first I had hoped it would only be a matter of time before he would allow me to provide the one true service to him, it never happened, and I began to fear it never would.

And though I tried to hide it from him, and never would have dared to inconvenience him with my own petty hopes or frustrations, he must have noticed it.

He is a kind Master, have I said this already?

“Hurt her!”

How often had I heard those same words, but how different were they now, when I was strapped to the iron frame!

And the girl to whom he had spoken them was standing in front of me.

My successor!

How I loved my Master!

How I wished she would serve him as well as I had, or even better!

“Hurt her!”

He had not given her any tools, he wanted to see what she could do without them.

“Hurt her!”

She slapped my face. She punched me in the belly. She kicked me in the crotch with her knees. She punched my face, my sides, my breasts. She kicked me with her feet. It was pathetic.

“Stop,” he finally said. Then he turned to me and said, “I’m sorry.”

I had tears in my eyes, tears because I knew now that he loved me.

And I knew that there would be another one, one day, but not now, but now it didn’t matter anymore.

“Untie her,” he said, and she obliged, and I tied her to the frame, and then I showed her what hands and feet and teeth could achieve in the Master’s service.

For hours, she screamed as few had screamed before her.

And for the first time ever, after she had exhausted herself and he had exhausted himself too, and with the glow of passion slowly fading from his face but still visible, he took me in his arms and kissed me.

THE PIER

How long have I been living here, in the dark woods, all by myself, on this deserted peninsula, isolated from civilization — years? decades? as a hermit? a refugee? — I do not even remember that. The climate is mild, I do not miss the clothes that have fallen to shreds long ago. I have what I need, there is water, there are fruits, berries, mushrooms, roots, and occasionally there is meat, which I eat raw, for I shy away from making fire, not knowing whether the smoke might draw attention.

Near the tip of the peninsula there is a bay in which, long ago, there had been a small harbor — now all that is left are a few half-decayed piers, wooden planks supported by rusted steel pillars. Even though the bay, like all the coast, is as deserted as the peninsula's interior, it would make me feel far too exposed to venture there during the days; I only visit it in the nights of the new moon, with nothing but the faint light of the stars and my knowledge of the location to guide me.

I do not remember when it has begun — like everything else in my life, it must have been a long time ago — but on one dark night, when I went down to the beach with the old harbor, I saw a shape on one of the piers. I went there, slowly, carefully ... that shape was a human being ... a woman ... naked, lying on her back, arms and legs spread, wrists and ankles secured with ropes to bolts on the edge of the pier, her mouth gagged. I had my knife with me, the only tool of civilization that I still possessed ... I could have cut her ropes ... but I began to cut her instead. I hadn't been with a woman for a long time ... she was dying when I left her, in time before dawn began to dispel the

safety of darkness. When I returned the next night, she was gone — no trace of her had remained. Maybe blood stains on the wooden planks, but on the dark wood, in the darkness, I wouldn't be able to discern them.

Since then, it has happened again. Not at every new moon, but often, on average at every third or fourth. Someone, something, is putting them up there for me, and taking them away again, after I have finished with them. Once I let one live, to return to her the next night, but she, too, was gone, so I always make full use of them in the one night they are given to me ...

Long ago, I have stopped asking myself what all of this means. I have never tried to ask them, fearing they might scream if I removed their gags, seeing the sparkle of their silent screams in their eyes. Strangely, I have never feared the presence of an intruder when I was with them — of the one or ones who brought them, and who took them away — in the presence of these girls, bleeding, moaning, suffering, slowly dying underneath or next to me, I've always felt safe ...

And now ... another dark new moon night ... I silently approach the old harbor — I am in luck again, there is a shape on the pier — I draw near, and I notice, something is different. It is the way she lies — on her back, naked, arms and legs spread like all the others, but still, differently. I reach her — again, I feel no fear — and I can see now that her arms and legs are not bound. She raises her head — her mouth is not gagged — and her eyes in the darkness do not sparkle with a silent scream, but with the hint of a smile. “I have waited for you a long time,” she says.

RAPTURE

The razor-sharp edge on which she has been seated has begun to draw blood from between her legs. Her ankles are chained to the ground, her wrists cuffed behind her back. Whip marks criss-cross her upper body with its heavy breasts.

Her eyes are half-shut. Her mouth is wide open, but except for her labored breathing, no sound escapes her.

“The look on her face is of rapture, isn’t it?” you say.

We speak in barely audible whispers. We stand in a dark corner, my arm around your waist. We watch her ordeal, watch her expression turn from rapture to agony, and back ...

“Will she die?” you ask.

“Yes, of course,” I say. “Not yet, though ...”

“I wonder what she feels,” you say.

“Not long from now, you will know, won’t you?” You lean against me, and I kiss your hair, lightly.

“No, I won’t,” you say. “Everyone feels her own pain.”

“I wish I could feel yours,” I say.

“I’ll feel it for you,” you say, and I kiss your hair again ...

ROSE OFFERING

“Today is the day of the seventh full moon, you will bring an offering to the shrine of the Goddess.”

“Yes, Mistress, thank you.”

You know which shrine that is — the small ancient shrine beneath the big tree on that knoll deep in the wood. It is for a minor Goddess, and the offering will be a symbolic one. Still, the offering has to be made.

You look up at the sky. It is still early in the morning, you will be able to reach the shrine and be back before the nightfall. It will not be an easy task, crossing the dark wood, even in daylight, but you have done it before. Not an easy task for a girl who wears nothing but her Mistress’s collar, which, in the fields and villages outside of the town, will not protect her from being called to serve — but it will protect you from being harmed, from being detained, from being hindered to perform your duty.

Having your body used by some peasants or passers-by for their pleasures will delay you for an hour, or maybe two, but then you will have left the town’s surroundings, and will be in the wood, where it is unlikely that you will encounter any more people. The path you will have to follow is narrow, and in some parts it is overgrown with thorn bushes, but not so thickly that you could not get through; the pain of the scratches and the blood on your skin you will have to ignore. If you keep up a good speed, do not rest, do not stray, you will reach the shrine in the early afternoon, and you will be back in time ... just in time ... and should you further be delayed by requests for your

services on your way back, it will be outside of the wood, in inhabited country, in view of the town, and it may be inconvenient, or painful, but you will be safe ...

You shudder as you fail to suppress a thought of the wood at night. Men, armed men, in groups, with torches, have entered it, have even crossed it, when necessary. But a girl, a naked unarmed girl on her own, who happens to be in the wood after dark, would never be seen or heard of again ... girls have disappeared ... bones have been found, sometimes, but never skulls ...

“What offering shall I bring the Goddess, my Mistress?” you ask.

“A rose from my garden,” the Mistress says. She is sitting on a stone bench in front of her house, nude, comfortably reclining on a set of soft pillows. As is her habit, she absent-mindedly fingers herself, as she looks at her garden — the different rose beds — she is looking for the right rose to pick. Then she frowns.

“Weed the beds before you go,” she says.

“My Mistress,” you say, “this means I can not go before the noon.”

“Yes?” she says.

“I will be in the wood when night falls,” you say. “I will die.”

“So?” she says.

You blush deeply, the heat of your shame is burning you. How could you have dared to insult your Mistress by speaking unrequestedly, by talking down to her, by presumptuously pointing out to her what is obvious, by bothering her with inconsequential matters of your own?

How *could* you have done this?

With greatest effort you fight down your tears of guilt and shame and remorse — to your unforgivable insult you must not add the

additional offense of exposing her to an unwarranted display of your self-centered and self-righteous petty emotions.

You do not move, you hardly dare to breathe.

“Bring me a drink before you start weeding.”

“Thank you, my Mistress,” you say, overwhelmed with joy and relief at her forgivingness. And while you pull out the weeds, though you keep your eyes down, you are aware of her gaze upon you, and you are happy to know that she enjoys watching you doing the garden-work, a beautiful naked girl, soon to die at her whim, moving gracefully among the flowers ...

THERE IS NOTHING

“I will not confess,” I say, “because I cannot. I had nothing to do with the rebellion, did not know about it, and I do not know of anyone who did.”

“Personally, I am inclined to believe you, Milady,” the torturer says. He still calls me Milady, as he had done all the years he had been employed at my estate, even though I am the prisoner now, naked, bound, helpless, fully in his power, and he is the one who is going to rape, torture and kill me. He is not mocking me, he shows his respect to someone who had always treated him kindly, and it was not by his own doing that things have changed, but changed they have.

“You understand, though, that it does not matter what I believe,” he continues.

I understand. I am going to die, and he cannot let me die without having questioned me thoroughly. Questioning means torture.

“I can still make it easier for you,” he says, “but not if you do not talk.”

“I know nothing, there is nothing I can tell you,” I say.

He looks at my naked exposed body, and there is no doubt that he likes what he sees. All those years, he had never acted, spoken or even looked at me in any even slightly improper way — it could have easily cost him his head if he had — but I had always been aware of the looks he had cast at me in his mind. Not in his wildest dreams, though, could he ever have imagined to have me at his disposal as he has me now.

He does not speak as he takes off his leather gown, shortly touches his penis to make it fully erect, and enters me between my thighs that

are spread wide by the bonds that hold me. He comes after a short time.

“I have always wanted this,” he says as he withdraws, “and a few other things, though I had not wanted what will have to follow.”

“But you will still do it,” I say, a statement of fact, not a question.

“Oh yes, of course,” he says. And he wants it, now. I see his eyes flashing for a fraction of a second before he drives his knee into my crotch, with full force. The pain shoots through my whole body, and the shock of the impact makes me gasp.

This is not yet torture, I know. This was just to point out, to me as well as to himself, that he is my master now, and that I cannot keep him from doing whatever he chooses to do with me.

Not unless I give him what is not mine to give. And even if it were, there would still be torture, agony and death.

We are not alone in the dungeon. On another wall, strapped to a similar wooden frame as I am, is a girl. She has not spoken a word — how could she have, with her mouth gagged? I do not know her, or at least I do not recognize her, she must be a peasant girl from one of the nearby villages. Like me she is naked and fully accessible, with her arms tied above her head and her legs spread wide. Unlike me, she has not ceased to strain at her bonds, and she looks around with wide, dark, fear-filled eyes. She is quite pretty, if a bit on the chubby side, her breasts full and larger than mine. She is an appealing sight to behold.

“You know the law,” the torturer says. “Before a Lady of nobility gets tortured, she will be shown the tortures that await her, so she can make up her mind to cooperate.”

“I know the law,” I reply. In here, he is the law.

“Talk, or she will have to suffer horribly,” he says, taking a red-hot

pair of pincers from the fire and holding it close to her left nipple, causing her to emit strange wailing sounds through her gag.

“Take out her gag,” I say, “or she might suffocate on her vomit when you rip off her breasts. Also, I would like to hear her scream.”

“You — *what?*” he says, turning to me, touching the girl’s side with the glowing iron without even noticing it, or the changed pitch of her muffled wails.

“You have heard me,” I say. With or without her gag, she cannot possibly know anything.

“This ... this is not a trick to make me spare her?” he says. How little he knows me. How little he knows. How inexperienced he is in his new role. How easily he is distracted.

“Why would I want you to?” I ask.

“You will suffer and die the same as she,” he says, still hesitating.

I would shrug, if I could. He reads it in my face.

“And there is really nothing you can tell me about the rebellion?”

“There is nothing,” I say. “Go on.”

With a knife he cuts the straps of her gag and takes it out, before he turns to take a fresh pair of pincers from the fire. Her mouth still half open, drool running out of it, the girl looks at me in horror. Time will pass, and things will change again. They always do. I smile.

THE WINDOW (WAR)

This is a nice apartment, that you have.

That you have had.

In which we are, but which doesn't belong to you anymore.

Just as nothing belongs to you anymore.

Not even your naked body here, your skin, your breasts, your sex.

And least of all your life.

All that doesn't belong to you anymore.

Soon, all that will be left for you will be agony.

And then, that will be over, too.

Come, let us go to the window, let us look out, down at the large square
in front of your house.

The way it is here, it is everywhere in this town, now.

Look at the women.

How does it feel, to see them die?

And how does it feel,

The coarse fabric of my uniform against your bare skin,

The edge of the blade in my hand against your side,

The fingers of my other hand probing the slit between your thighs,

Exploring its secret response?

Do you like this? Are you ashamed? Confused?

I can feel how fast you are breathing.

They are all naked.

Some of them are running, away, away from the soldiers, away
from the men.

But where they are running to, other men already stand.

Let us open the window, so we can hear the shouting and the screams.

There, look how this one is running, naked, on bare feet, in panic
she doesn't look left or right.

One of them trips her up. Look how she falls, her hands too slow,
on her face, with full force.

Already others are surrounding her, are turning her on her back.

Now they are kicking her with their boots.

One opens his trousers, now he lies on top of her, one grabs her ankle
to help him, now he enters her.

With one hand he supports himself, with his other hand's fist
he punches her bleeding face.

Look at this one.

One catches up with her, grabs her from behind by her long hair.

He holds her from behind, two others come from the front, they punch
their fists into her belly, into her breasts.

The one who still holds her from behind, by her hair, pushes her down
now, to her knees.

The others take turns now, kicking her between her legs.

One stands close to her now, his crotch pressed against her face.

The one behind her puts his hands around her throat.

We cannot see it from here, but we know what happens to her now.

This one, who runs here — now she got a bullet into her belly.
She stops, stands still, looks down at the wound, when the next bullet
hits her.

Luck, or good aim, exactly into her sex.
And the next one into her left knee. Now she falls.

Here one is running — look! — two bleeding red wounds on her chest.
They have cut off her breasts.

Look, she doesn't get far. Now she is lying on the ground.
Two are spreading her legs, one thrusts the barrel of his rifle into
her vagina.

Now he pulls the trigger. Look how her body convulses.

Look over there, one is leaning against the wall of a house.
Her belly cut open, her bowels are pouring out, with both hands
she tries to hold them in.

Some men are throwing stones at her, they are aiming at her face.
When she tries to cover her face with her arms and hands, she has
to let go of her bowels.

Here — this one has given up, she just stands, naked, her eyes
cast down.

Men walk up to her, knives with pointed blades in their hands.

One grabs her wrists, but she doesn't resist anyway.

Now they begin to stab her. Everywhere. Into her shoulders,
her breasts, her belly, her sides, her sex, her thighs.

But not too deep, they do not want to kill her.

Not too fast.

From the house next to us a woman falls out of a window, naked, too.
She hits the ground — she lives, she tries to get up, but her legs
are broken.

Men with bludgeons walk up to her, strike her with them, again
and again.

Almost every bone in her body must be broken by now.

But she is still alive. They do not strike her head.

Not yet.

She looks up to us — do you know her? Do you know her name?

Does she know yours?

What may she be thinking now?

Now one of the men looks up to us, too.

He sees you, as you lean out of the window, to get a better view.

He cannot see your breasts, but he sees that you are naked.

Then he sees my uniform, says something to the others, and they
leave the woman and walk away.

From around the corner, where they have gone, we hear
a woman scream.

They will all die.

The ones will die today. The other ones — they do not know it yet,
but, soon.

All of them. All of us.

But now the time for you and me has come to part.

The time for you has come.

You have to leave now, this is not your apartment anymore, not
your house anymore.

Here, next to me, is not your place anymore. And mine not
next to you.

I can do nothing for you. You have to go down now.
And I will remain here, on my own, standing at the window
that had been ours.

Loss

“No, please, no, not our daughter! Surely the Queen ...” I did not continue, I did not know how to continue. “Not our daughter, not *her*, please ...”

“I am only the messenger,” he said. He had been here before, to summon her. More than once, more than most others, had she been summoned, to the feasts and ceremonies at the Queen’s court, to serve the Queen’s illustrious guests, and before that she had been summoned to undergo the painful procedure by which those guests would be assured that they would not, later, be confronted with claims by alleged, if illegitimate, heirs to their power or wealth. She had been summoned, and she had gone, for such summoning has to be heeded, but always had we been able to hope that she would return, and always had she returned. Sometimes crying, sometimes ill, sometimes wounded, but undefeated, and always had we nursed her back to health, to beauty, to strength, to life. And, braver than us, never had she tried to hide or to run, never had she cowered or given in, always had she stayed true to herself.

But this time, it was for a different kind of appearance at the Queen’s court to which the messenger had come to summon her. Summoned to this one, no one returns.

“Not our daughter, not *now*, please!”

His expression was that of someone who had seen too much, too often. “I am waiting,” he said.

I tried not to cry before they were gone, but I failed.

IV

German stories, written in the 1970s,
followed by their English translations

BESUCH

Ein leicher Wind kam von Westen über den Wald und bewegte die Äste der Bäume, von denen einige mit ihren Gipfeln bis hier in die Höhe der vierten Etage reichten, und deren dichtes Blätterwerk den Blick nicht bis zum Boden durchdringen ließ; der Wind dränge die Dunstwolke der Stadt zurück, die grau und stickig bis hierher vorgedrungen war. Ich trat zurück in die Wohnung und schloss die Balkontüre hinter mir. Der Wind brachte die Kühle der Abenddämmerung; die Schreie der Mädchen, durch die Bäume gedämpft, waren nun bei geschlossenen Fenstern kaum noch zu hören.

Das Mädchen saß im Fauteuil, das Glas mit dem Fruchtsaft hielt sie in der Hand, von der Bonbonniere auf dem gläsernen Couchtisch hatte sie nichts genommen. „Darf ich telefonieren?“ fragte sie noch einmal; ich hatte ihr schon beim ersten Mal geantwortet, dass das unvernünftig wäre. Sie würde sich, denen, die sie anrief, und vielleicht auch uns Probleme schaffen, die wir nicht beurteilen konnten. Es war sicher schwer für sie. Sie erzählte nicht, wer sie war, und auch nicht, wie sie den Braunhemden hatte entkommen können; in der Kurve vor dem Parkplatz hatte es einen Unfall gegeben. Ich goss ihr Fruchtsaft nach. Vor einigen Stunden war sie noch durch die Stadt gegangen, ich weiß nicht, durch welche Straßen, sie hatte ein Kleid gekauft und eine Freundin getroffen, bevor sie den Braunen aufgefallen war. Sie hatte dunkle Haare, in langen Locken bis über die Schultern herab, und sie trug ihr neues Kleid, aus weißer Seide, dünn, am Körper anliegend, mit kurzen Ärmeln; was immer sie mit sich getragen hatte, hatte sie verloren. Sie wirkte klein und verloren zwischen den großen weichen

Pölstern. Ich schob ihr die Bonbonniere näher, aber sie nahm nichts. Hier im Wald vor dem Haus, bei den Mauern einer alten Ruine, ist einer der Plätze, wo die Braunhemden ihre Treffen haben. Sie vergewaltigen die Mädchen, sie zerschneiden und zerreißen ihnen die Kleider und, wenn ihnen danach ist, die Brüste, und beim Lagerfeuer sprechen sie dann von den großen Jahren, denen die waren, und denen die noch kommen würden, und dann grölen sie ihre Lieder, und was sie noch alles mit den Mädchen machen, wissen wir nicht. Unsere Beschwerden sind ohne Antwort geblieben, immer noch sind bis spät in die Nacht die Schreie und die Lieder zu hören, wenn nicht alle Fenster fest geschlossen bleiben. „Können Sie mir Tabletten geben?“ Sie sprach leise, ohne viel Hoffnung. Ich sah die Medikamentenlade durch, und fand eine angebrochene Packung. Ich schloss die Lade wieder. Die anderen mussten es auch überstehen. „Es tut mir leid“, sagte ich. Ich habe von ihr nicht erfahren, was sie eigentlich erwartet hatte, als sie unten auf alle Klingelknöpfe gedrückt hatte; ich war der einzige gewesen, der sie eingelassen hatte. Sie mussten gesehen haben, wie sie das Haus betrat, und jetzt darauf warten, dass sie wieder herauskam. Leute wie sie warteten nicht gerne. „Es tut mir leid, aber ich erwarte Besuch“, sagte ich. Sie stand auf, und ich führte sie zum Lift.

VISITOR

Across the wood a light breeze blew from the west and stirred the branches of the trees, of which some reached up with their crowns here to the level of the fourth floor, and whose thick foliage prevented the gaze from penetrating to the ground; the wind pushed back the cloud of gray and stuffy city air that had stretched towards here. I stepped back into the apartment and closed the balcony door behind me. The wind brought the chill of dusk; through the closed windows the screams of the girls, muffled by the trees, could now hardly be heard anymore.

The girl was sitting in the armchair, the glass with the fruit juice in her hand, she had not taken anything from the box of chocolates on the glass coffee table. "May I use your telephone?" she asked once again; I had already replied before that this would not be wise. For herself, for those whom she might call, and maybe for us, she might create problems which we could not assess. It was certainly not easy for her. She did not say who she was, or how she had managed to escape the brown-shirts; at the bend of the road before the parking lot there had been an accident. I filled up her fruit juice glass. A few hours ago she had been walking through the town, I do not know along which streets, she had bought a summer dress and met a friend, before she had caught the attention of the brown-shirts. She had dark hair, falling down in long locks over her shoulders, and she was wearing her new dress, thin white silk, fitting to the contours of her body, with short sleeves; whatever she had carried with her, was gone. She looked small and lost among the large soft pillows. I pushed the box of

chocolates closer to her, but she took no notice of it. Here in the wood that stretches in front of the house, by the walls of an old ruin, is one of the places where the brown-shirts have their gatherings. They rape the girls, they cut and tear up their clothes, and when they feel like it, their breasts, and by the campfire they talk about the glorious years, those that had been, and those that were yet to come, and then they bawl out their songs, and what they do with the girls then, we do not know. Our complaints have never received replies, and still until late into the nights the din of the screams and the songs can be heard, unless all the windows remain firmly shut. “Can you give me some pills?” She spoke softly, without much hope. I looked through the medicine drawer, and found an opened package. I closed the drawer again. The others had to go through it, too. “I am sorry,” I said. I never learned from her what she had actually expected, when she had pushed all the bell buttons of our apartment building; I had been the only one who had let her in. They must have seen how she had entered the house, and now they must be waiting for her to come out again. People like them did not wait gladly. “I am sorry, but I am expecting a visitor,” I said. She got up, and I led her to the elevator.

SCHÖPFUNG

In der einen Richtung erstreckt sich der Urwald; sein Boden ist Sumpf, seine Bewohner sind die tödlichen Tiere, er hat keine Lichtungen, und niemand hat ihn je durchqueren und zurückkehren können. In der anderen Richtung erstreckt sich der Berg; er ist aus bloßem scharfem Fels, kein Leben kann auf ihm existieren, er hat keine Täler, und niemand hat je zu seinem Gipfel aufsteigen können. In der dritten Richtung schließlich, dem Berg und dem Urwald gegenüber, liegt das Meer; von dort kommen die Stürme, seine Wellen sind hoch wie die Bäume, niemand hat je ein anderes Ufer gesehen, aber im Meer leben die Fische. Dort, wo der Urwald, die Felsen und das Meer zusammentreffen, ist der Platz der Menschen, und an'Ha ist ihr Gott. an'Ha, der alles geschaffen hat, hat die Menschen geschaffen als Krönung seines Werkes.

an'Ha hat den Urwald geschaffen, dessen Sumpf den verschlingt, der auf die Stelle tritt, die ihn gestern noch sicher getragen hat, den Urwald, dessen Tiere aus dem Boden kriechen, sich von den Bäumen herabwinden, aus dem Dickicht hervorschnellen, die Fleisch aus dem Körper reißen und verschwinden, und deren Gift den Menschen lähmt, bis die anderen Tiere kommen, ihren Hunger zu stillen; den Urwald, dessen Schlingpflanzen und dessen Dornengestrüppe rascher wachsen können, als der Mensch sie mit seinem Messer durchschlagen kann, die den Weg versperren, während der Boden unter den Füßen sich in Sumpf verwandelt, und die tödlichen Tiere den Menschen umkreisen.

an'Ha hat den Berg geschaffen, dessen Wände oft in der Höhe

mehrerer Bäume senkrecht emporsteigen oder auch überhängen, den Berg, dessen mächtige Felsen von Sprüngen durchzogen sind, so dass der Stein, der einen sicheren Halt zu bieten scheint, mit dem Kletterer in die Tiefe stürzt, den Berg, von dem der Sturm stets Steinlawinen löst, die nicht nur den Kletterer erschlagen, sondern die oft auch bis auf den Platz der Menschen stürzen, die Häuser einschlagen, den Menschen die Glieder zerschmettern; den Berg, dessen Felsen sich bewegen, und plötzlich Spalten öffnen, in die der Mensch stürzt, der eben noch auf festem Stein gegangen ist, oder die den zerdrücken, der sich gerade durch einen engen Durchgang schiebt, den Berg, auf dem es keine Pflanzen, kein Tier und kein Wasser gibt, weil er jedem Leben feindlich ist.

an’Ha hat das Meer geschaffen, dessen Stürme jedes Boot auf das Ufer zutreiben, wo es an den Felsen zerschellt oder vom Urwald verschlungen wird, wenn es nicht genau den Platz der Menschen findet, das Meer, dessen Wellen jedes Boot zum Kentern bringen, wenn die Ruderer nur für einen Augenblick in ihrer Aufmerksamkeit oder ihrer Kraft nachlassen, das Meer, dessen Raubfische jeden zerreißen, der von einer Welle aus seinem Boot gespült wird, das Meer, über dem plötzliche Unwetter aufkommen, bei denen die Boote vom Blitz zerschlagen oder vom Wirbelwind emporgerissen und zerschmettert werden, das Meer, dessen Wasser bei den großen Fluten den Platz der Menschen überschwemmt, und sie in den Urwald oder auf den Berg treibt, wo der Tod sie erwartet.

an’Ha hat die Menschen geschaffen. Er hat sie so geschaffen, dass sie in den Urwald eindringen können, den Berg besteigen können, das Meer befahren können, ohne den Urwald, den Berg oder das Meer bezwingen zu können, und an’Ha hat die Menschen so geschaffen, dass sie Schmerzen empfinden, wenn dabei ihre Körper zerstört werden,

und dass sie Angst empfinden vor diesen Schmerzen und vor der Zerstörung. an'Ha hat den Menschen gegeben, was sie zum Leben brauchen, und er hat es ihnen weit im Meer, tief im Urwald und hoch auf dem Berg gegeben.

Aus dem Meer holen die Menschen die Fische, die sie fangen können, wenn sie von der Dämmerung bis Mittag mit aller Kraft hinausrudern, vier oder sechs Männer in einem kleinen Boot, dann die Netze werfen, weiter rudern, um nicht abgetrieben zu werden oder zu kentern, und sie dann noch vor der Dunkelheit zurückkehren, um nicht in der Nacht an den Klippen zu zerschellen; wenn der Sturm, der nach Mittag zur Küste weht, ausbleibt, erreichen sie den Platz der Menschen nicht mehr, und noch kein Boot hat die Nacht auf dem Meer überstanden.

Aus dem Urwald holen die Menschen das Holz, aus dem sie ihre Boote bauen, und die Bäume, deren Holz sich verwenden lässt, wachsen tief im Inneren des Waldes. Aus dem Urwald holen die Menschen die Lianen, aus denen sie die Seile flechten, aus denen die Netze gewoben sind, mit denen sie die Fische fangen, und diese Lianen wachsen nur an den feuchtesten Stellen, wo der Sumpf am gefährlichsten ist. Aus dem Urwald holen sie noch die Früchte und Wurzeln, die sie essen können, und von denen einige das tödliche Gift enthalten, ohne dass sich ihr Aussehen von den anderen unterscheidet. Wenn drei Männer durch den Urwald gehen, muss einer auf den Boden achten, und zwei müssen die tödlichen Tiere abwehren, dann können sie eine Strecke weit gehen, bis ein Dornengestrüpp den Weg verschließt; erst der Vierte kann eine Last tragen, und je mehr sie sind, desto gefährlicher wird der Boden, und desto mehr Tiere locken sie an, und wer in den Sumpf einsinkt, dem zerfressen die im Boden

lebenden Würmer das Fleisch, bevor seine Gefahren ihn wieder herausziehen können.

Aus dem Berg holen die Menschen das Erz, aus dem sie das harte und das weiche Metall gewinnen, und aus dem harten Metall machen sie die Messer und Äxte die alleine es ihnen möglich machen, in den Urwald einzudringen, das Dickicht zu zerteilen, die Tiere abzuwehren, und die Holzbäume umzuhauen; aus dem Metall machen sie auch Nägel, Hämmer, Zangen, Bohrer, Sägen und anderes Werkzeug, das sie benötigen, um ihre Boote zu bauen. Die Steine, die das Erz enthalten, liegen verstreut unter all den anderen Steinen, und ein Mann kann mehrere Tage klettern, bis er an eine Stelle gerät, wo er Erz findet, und dann kann er nur einen Brocken mit zurück nehmen, und bis er wiederkehrt, hat ein Felssturz das Erz verschüttet, oder ihn selbst treffen Steine und zerschlagen seine Knochen, so dass er liegenbleiben muss, bis er verdurstet.

an'Ha hat alles geschaffen, was Schmerzen zufügen kann, und er hat das Leben geschaffen, damit etwas da ist, diese Schmerzen zu erleiden, und die Menschen sind die Krönung seines Werkes, weil sie die größten Schmerzen erleiden können von all seinen Geschöpfen. an'Ha lässt die Felsen auf die Männer stürzen, die das Erz suchen, er lässt die Sümpfe die Männer verschlingen, die das Holz bringen, und er lässt das Meer die Männer ertränken, die nach den Fischen rudern, wenn die Schmerzen, die er sieht, ihm nicht genügen. Wenn es aber kein Erz, kein Holz und keine Fische gibt, dann verhungern die Menschen, und für an'Ha gibt es keine Schmerzen mehr; darum muss an'Ha stets genügend Schmerzen sehen, so dass er die Männer auf dem Berg, im Urwald und auf dem Meer verschont, und so besteht zwischen an'Ha und den Menschen der heilige Pakt. Die Woche hat

sieben Tage, und jeden Tag hat an'Ha nach dem benannt, wodurch die Ausgewählte Schmerzen erleiden soll.

Der erste Tag ist der Tag der Dornen: sie wird auf Dornenmatten geworfen und mit Dornenruten geschlagen, und ihr Leib wird mit Dornen umwickelt, bis ihre Haut darunter nicht mehr zu sehen ist. Der zweite Tag ist der Tag der Stricke: sie wird an den Armen und Beinen gebunden und auseinandergezogen, bis ihre Gelenke zerdehnt sind, um ihre Brüste werden Schlingen zusammengezogen bis sie drohen zu platzen, endlich bleibt sie so geschnürt liegen, dass die Stricke alle ihre Glieder ausgerenkt halten. Der dritte Tag ist der Tag der Nägel: die Nägel werden ihr durch den Leib geschlagen, so dass sie die Knochen durchstoßen, durch alle Glieder, die Schultern, die Hüften, bis die Knochen zerspringen. Der vierte Tag ist der Tag der Steine: sie liegt mit ihrem Rücken auf einem Bett aus Steinen, Steine werden auf sie geworfen, auf ihre Glieder aber auch zwischen ihre Beine, auf die Brüste und auf den Bauch, und ein Steinehaufen wird über ihr aufgeschichtet, unter dem sie die Nacht verbringt. Der fünfte Tag ist der Tag der Zangen: die Nägel werden ihr von den Zehen und den Fingern gerissen, die Zähne aus dem Mund, die Spitzen von ihren Brüsten, und die Brüste von ihrem Leib. Der sechste Tag ist der Tag der Feuer: sie wird auf glosendes Holz gelegt, ihre Wunden werden ausgebrannt, und ein brennendes Holzscheid erhält sie in ihre Scheide. Der siebente Tag schließlich ist der Tag der Messer, und der Vollendung: ihr Leib wird geöffnet, damit an'Ha in ihr Inneres sehen kann, dann wird sie auf die große Felsspitze getragen, und von dort, wenn an'Ha zufrieden ist, kann sie sich mit der letzten qualvollen Anstrengung ihres zerrissenen, zerbrochenen und zerschnittenen Körpers ins Meer, in den Urwald oder auf die Steine stürzen, um ihre Schmerzen zu beenden.

Dann wird das weiche Metall, das rötlich in der Sonne glänzt, ans Ufer gebracht, wo es in der Nacht die Fremden holen, und wenn an'Ha zufrieden ist, dann gibt er es, dass diese Fremden keine Menschen töten, bevor sie gehen. Wenn aber an'Ha nicht zufrieden ist, weil er den Körper und den Geist der Menschen so geschaffen hat, dass sie mehr Schmerzen erleiden können, als die Ausgewählte erlitten hat, oder wenn ihr Körper falsch behandelt wurde, so dass ihr Leben zu Ende war, bevor sie alle Schmerzen erlitten hat, oder gar, wenn sie nicht bereitwillig und dankbar gelitten hat, dann lässt an'Ha im Urwald die Dornensträucher wuchern, dann lässt er die Stricke reißen, dann lässt er die Nägel das Holz zersplittern, dann lässt er die Steine herabstürzen, dann lässt er die Zangen zerbrechen, dann lässt er die Feuer erlöschen, dann lässt er die Klingen der Menschen stumpf werden, wenn er die Fremden schickt, die Menschen zu töten. an'Ha, der alles geschaffen hat, den Urwald, die Felsen, das Meer und die Menschen, hat alle Dinge nach ihrer Art geschaffen.

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Das ist die heilige Schrift des Volkes der n'Har, die hier zum ersten Mal in einer Übersetzung veröffentlicht wird. Ihr Original befindet sich in unserem Nationalmuseum; mit glühenden Eisenstiften wurden die Schriftzeichen, die sich noch stark an eine Bilderschrift anlehnen, in die Rinde eines Baumes gebrannt. Es war der einzige Baum, der innerhalb des „Platzes der Menschen“ stand, und der den n'Har als heilig galt. Er befand sich im Zentrum der kreisförmigen Ansiedlung von ebenerdigen, aus roh behauenen Steinen zusammengefügtten Häusern, die von etwa tausend Menschen bewohnt war.

Wenn auch einige Stellen der Schrift nicht mehr lesbar sind, und die Interpretation einiger Schriftzeichen mit Unsicherheiten behaftet

ist (zum Beispiel könnte, wie archäologische Funde nahelegen, das hier mit „Mann“, „Männer“ bzw. „er“ übersetzte Zeichen auch Frauen einschließen, die sich an den beschriebenen Aktivitäten beteiligten), und auch andere Fragen noch offen sind, so kann der hier vorgelegte Text aber jedenfalls als bedeutendes authentisches Zeugnis der Kultur eines Volkes gelten, das interessante spezifische Lösungen seiner spezifischen Lebensprobleme hervorgebracht hat. Zu den offenen Fragen gehört beispielsweise, wer die „Fremden“ waren, denen die n’Har Tribut in Gold geleistet haben, aber auch, wie oft die beschriebene Zeremonie stattgefunden hat – jede Woche? einmal im Jahr? zu bestimmten Daten, oder aus bestimmten Anlässen? Hat es sie tatsächlich in der beschriebenen Form gegeben, wofür manche Forscher vermuten Beweise gefunden zu haben, oder handelt es sich hier um eine Überlieferung aus mythologischer Vorzeit? Wir wissen es nicht, und die n’Har selbst, welche die Kämpfe, die der Entdeckung ihres Gebietes folgten, nicht überlebt haben, können uns keine Antworten mehr auf unsere Fragen geben; wir können aber zuversichtlich sein, dass die weitere wissenschaftliche Arbeit, die wir mit ebenso viel Fleiß wie Findigkeit vorantreiben, unser Wissen über dieses Volk und seine Lebensweise vervollständigen wird.

CREATION

In the one direction stretches the jungle: its ground is swamp, its denizens are the deadly creatures, there are no open glades in it, and no one has ever been able to walk to its end, and come back. In the other direction stretches the mountain: it is made of bare craggy rock, no life can exist on it, it has no valleys, and no one has ever been able to climb to its summit. In the third direction, finally, opposite the mountain and the jungle, lies the sea: from there come the storms, its waves are as high as trees, no one has ever seen another shore, but in the sea live the fish. There, where the jungle, the rocks and the sea meet, is the place of the humans, and an'Ha is their god. an'Ha, who has created everything, has created the humans, as the crown of his creation.

an'Ha has created the jungle, whose swamp engulfs those who step on the spot that had safely supported them the day before, the jungle, whose creatures crawl out of the ground, wriggle down from the trees, dart out of the thicket, rip flesh out of the living body and vanish, and whose poisons paralyse a human, until other creatures come to satisfy their hunger, the jungle whose smothering vines and whose thorn bushes can grow faster than a human can cut through them with his knife, which block the path while the ground underneath the human's feet turns into swamp, and the deadly creatures encircle their human prey.

an'Ha has created the mountain, whose crags often rise up vertically, or even project, several times the height of a tree, the mountain, whose mighty rocks are crisscrossed with cracks so that the stone that

promises to offer a secure hold tumbles down, taking the climber with it, the mountain, from which the storms keep dislodging avalanches of stones that not only smash the climber, but often crash down upon the place of the humans, shatter their houses, break their limbs; the mountain, whose rocks can shift, and suddenly open crevices into which the man plunges who had just walked on solid ground, or crush the one who had just been squeezing through a narrow rift, the mountain, on which there exist no plants, no animals and no water, because it is hostile to any form of life.

an'Ha has created the sea, whose storms drive any boat towards the shore where it is dashed to pieces against the rocks or swallowed up by the jungle if it does not exactly find the place of the humans, the sea, whose waves will capsize any boat if the rowers' strength or attention ever lapses for even a moment, the sea, whose predators quickly tear apart anyone whom a wave has washed overboard, the sea, over which sudden thunderstorms arise in which boats are smashed by lightning or are lifted out of the water and shattered by whirlwinds, the sea, whose waters during great floods submerge the place of the humans, driving them into the jungle or up the mountain, where death is waiting for them.

an'Ha has created the humans. He has created them so that they can penetrate into the jungle, that they can climb the mountain, that they can sail the sea, but can never conquer jungle, mountain or sea, and an'Ha has created the humans so that they feel pain when their bodies are destroyed in their attempts, and so that they feel fear of that pain and of that destruction. an'Ha has given the humans what they need to survive, and he has given it to them far out in the sea, deep within the jungle, and high up on the mountain.

From the sea the humans gain the fish, which they can catch if they row out from dawn to noon with all their strength, four or six men in a small boat, then throw out their nets, rowing on, not to capsize or be carried off by the current, and then return before dark, not to be smashed against the cliffs in the night; and if the storm that blows towards the coast after noon fails to arrive they will not reach the place of the humans in time, and no boat has ever survived a night out on the sea.

From the jungle the humans gain the wood with which they build their boats, and the trees whose wood can be used grow deep inside the forest. From the jungle they gain the lianas, which they braid into the ropes from which their nets are woven, with which they catch the fish, and these lianas only grow in the wettest areas, where the swamp is most dangerous. From the jungle they also gain the fruits and the roots which they can eat, and of which some contain the deadly poison, without their appearance showing any difference to that of the others. When three men enter the jungle one has to watch the ground, and two have to fight off the deadly creatures, then they can walk for a distance, until a thicket of thorns blocks their way; only the fourth can carry a load, and the more they are, the more treacherous gets the ground, and the more creatures they attract, and whoever sinks into the swamp, the worms that live in the ground devour his flesh, before his companions can pull him out again.

From the mountain the humans gain the ore, from which they gain the hard and the soft metal, and from the hard metal they make the knives and axes which alone makes it possible for them to penetrate the jungle, break through the thicket, fend off the creatures, and fell the timber trees; from that metal they also make nails, hammers, pliers, drills, saws, and other tools they need to build their boats. The stones

that contain the ore lie scattered among all the other stones, and a man can climb for several days before he reaches a spot where he finds ore, and then he can take only one chunk with him, and before he can return, a rockslide has buried the ore, or he himself gets hit by rocks that smash his bones, so that he has to lie where he was hit, until he dies of thirst.

an'Ha has created everything that can cause pain, and he has created life, so that there is something to suffer that pain, and the humans are the crown of his creation, because they among all his creatures can suffer the most pain. an'Ha lets the rocks fall upon the men who search for the ore, he lets the swamps devour the men who fetch the wood, he lets the sea drown the men who row out for the fish, when the pain that he sees does not suffice him. But when there are no ore, no wood and no fish, then the humans will starve to death, and there will be no pain anymore for an'Ha; therefore an'Ha always has to see enough pain, so that he will spare the men on the mountain, in the jungle, and out at sea, and so between an'Ha and the humans there is the sacred pact. The week has seven days, and each day an'Ha has named after that from which the chosen one shall suffer pain.

The first day is the day of the thorns: she will be thrown upon a bed of thorns, will be beaten with thorn rods, her body will be wrapped in thorns until her skin can no longer be seen. The second day is the day of the ropes: she will be stretched by her bound wrists and ankles until her joints are torn, coils will be tightened around her breasts until they threaten to burst, and finally she is left lying, tied up with dislocated limbs. The third day is the day of the nails: nails are driven through her body so that they penetrate her bones, those of her limbs, her shoulders, her hips, until they break apart. The fourth day is the day of the stones: she lies on her back on a bed of stones, stones

are thrown upon her, upon her limbs, but also between her legs, upon her breasts, and upon her belly, and a heap of stones is piled up over her, under which she will spend the night. The fifth day is the day of the pliers: her nails will be ripped from her toes and fingers, her teeth from her mouth, her nipples from her breasts, and her breasts from her body. The sixth day is the day of the fires: she is laid upon smoldering wood, her wounds are cauterized, and a burning piece of wood is pushed into her vagina. The seventh day finally is the day of the knives, and the day of completion: her body is cut open so that an'Ha can see inside of her, then she is carried up to the peak of the large crag, and from there, when an'Ha is satisfied, with a final agonizing exertion of her cut, torn and broken body, she can throw herself into the sea, into the jungle, or upon the rocks, to end her pain. Then the soft metal, which glows with a reddish sheen in the light of the sun, is brought to the shore, where in the night the foreigners will come and take it, and when an'Ha is content, he makes it that these foreigners do not kill any of the humans, before they leave. But if an'Ha is not content, because he has created the bodies and the minds of the humans to be able to suffer more pain than the chosen one had suffered, if her body had been treated negligently so that her life ended before she had suffered all her due agonies, or, worst of all, if she had failed to suffer willingly and gracefully, then an'Ha makes the thorn bushes sprawl in the jungle, then he makes the ropes tear, then he makes the nails splinter the wood, then he makes the rocks tumble down, then he makes the pliers break apart, then he makes the fires go out, and then he makes the blades of the humans go blunt, when he sends the foreigners to kill them. an'Ha, who has created everything, the jungle, the rocks, the sea and the humans, has created everything according to its nature.

This is the holy scripture of the n’Har people, which is made available here to the public for the first time in a translation. Its original is in our national museum; with red hot iron styluses the symbols, which still show characteristics of a pictographic script, have been burned into the bark of a tree. It had been the only tree that had grown within the “Place of the Humans,” and which the n’Har had held to be sacred. It had stood at the center of the circular settlement of one-storied houses, assembled from roughly hewn stones, which had been inhabited by about a thousand people.

While some parts of the text are not legible anymore, and the interpretations of some of the symbols are disputed (for instance, as archaeological finds seem to suggest, the symbol that is here translated as “man,” “men” or “he,” could also include women who took part in the described activities), and other questions, too, remain unresolved, nonetheless the text that is here presented must be seen as an important authentic testimony of the culture of a people that has produced interesting specific solutions to the specific problems that it had to face. Among the still unanswered questions is, for instance, who the “foreigners” were, to whom the n’Har had paid their tribute in gold, but also, how often the described ceremony had taken place — every week? once every year? at certain dates, or at certain occurrences? Did it actually take place as it was here described, or is this a lore from a mythological prehistoric age? We do not know, and the n’Har themselves, who were wiped out in the conflicts that arose from the discovery of their territory, cannot answer our questions anymore. We are confident, though, that further scientific work, which we are pursuing with as much diligence as ingenuity, will add to our understanding of this people and their way of living.

ZEIT

Solange ich mich erinnern kann, und das ist sehr lange, hat es nie irgendwelche Schwierigkeiten mit der großen Uhr gegeben, die über der Türe hängt, durch die manchmal Menschen in den Saal kommen. Für diejenigen von uns — und das sind die meisten — die gelernt haben, die Uhr zu lesen, war sie stets eine Quelle von Ruhe, Zuversicht und Ordnung, sie brachte einen Halt in unser Leben, etwas Objektives, an dem wir uns messen konnten, eine stets gültige Realität, an der wir unsere Realität erfahren konnten. Die Zeit war unser Freund, es war wichtig zu wissen, dass es sechs Uhr zwanzig war, und wenn alles sich veränderte, wenn es hell wurde und wieder dunkel, wenn es warm wurde und wieder kalt, wenn wir hungrig wurden und zu Essen bekamen, die Zeit änderte sich nicht, und einige von uns gingen, andere kamen an ihre Stelle, aber die Zeit blieb, sechs Uhr zwanzig, und das war gut so, und wir wussten es.

Seit kurzem aber ist es unruhig geworden, durch die kleinen Fenster sieht man Feuerschein wenn der Himmel dunkel ist, und die dicken Mauern erbeben, wenn wir dumpfes Donnern hören. Drei Männer sind in unseren Saal gekommen, andere Männer als sonst, einer hat eine Kiste voll Werkzeug mitgebracht, einer hielt ein Gewehr, und einer hat gesprochen, von einer neuen Zeit, während der mit dem Werkzeug sich an der Uhr zu schaffen machte, und wir nicht verstanden, was vor sich ging. Jetzt sind sie gegangen, es scheint schon lange her, und unser Leben hat sich wieder beruhigt. Es ist eine neue Zeit, in der wir jetzt leben, und wir werden uns an sie gewöhnen, werden mit ihr leben, und die meisten von uns sind überzeugt, dass

es eine bessere Zeit ist, die wir jetzt haben. Auch ich finde, die neue Zeit hat kommen müssen, und, anders als die Anderen, denke ich sogar, dass auch sie nicht ewig bleiben wird; vielleicht erleben wir es, vielleicht auch nicht, aber jedenfalls wissen wir, die neue Zeit ist gut, acht Uhr fünfundvierzig, acht Uhr fünfundvierzig, es gibt sogar schon einige unter uns, die die alte Zeit gar nicht mehr miterlebt haben.

TIME

For as long as I can remember, and that's a long time, there have never been any problems with the big clock that hangs above the door through which sometimes men or women come into the hall. For those among us — and that is most of us — who have learned to read the clock, it has always been a source of regularity, confidence and comfort, bringing stability into our lives, an always present reality, by which we could measure our own. Time was our friend, it was important to know that it was twenty minutes past six, and when everything changed, when it got light and dark again, when it got warm and cold again, when we got hungry and received our meals, time did not change, and some of us departed, and others came in their place, but the time remained, twenty minutes past six, and that was good, and we knew it.

Recently though there have been disturbances, through the small windows reflections of fires can be seen when the sky is dark, and the thick walls tremble when we hear the roar of distant thunder. Three men have entered our hall, others than before. One brought a box of tools with him, one carried a gun, and one held a speech, about a new time, while the one with the tools busied himself with the clock, and we did not understand what was going on. Now they have left, it already seems long ago, and our lives have calmed down again. It is a new time in which we live now, and we will get used to it, we will live with it, and most of us are convinced that it is indeed a better time, which which we now have. I, too, think that the new time had had to come, and, unlike the others, I even think that it, too, may not remain

forever; maybe we will live to see this, maybe not, but we do know that the new time is good, eight forty-five, eight forty-five, and there are already some among us, who haven't even known the old time.

V

GRASSHOPPER

This is a true story. I was there.

Wrong.

Wrong.

Wrong.

Wrong.

Sights wrong.

Sounds wrong.

Scents wrong.

Antennae feel wrong.

Place wrong.

Directions wrong.

No where-to.

Move not make better.

Move may danger.

Wait may better.

Wait.

Conserve strength.

Rest.

Wait.

Sleep.

Wrong wrong wrong wrong wrong.
Sudden wrong wrong wrong.
Confined space.
Trapped.
Fear.
Move.
Try.
No escape.
Not move.
Not move.

Opening.
Sudden different.
Trap gone.
Escaped.
Sights right.
Sounds right.
Scents right.
Antennae air feel right.
Legs feel right.
Tree branch under legs.
Large tree.
Large trunk ahead.
But wrong.
Threat.
Huge lives-moves-danger behind close close.
Move danger.
Not move.
Not move.

Huge lives-moves-danger not moves.

Not away.

Danger.

Antennae need move.

Antennae move.

Cautious slow slow.

Huge lives-moves-danger not moves.

Distance.

Must distance.

Antennae move.

Must move.

Move slow.

Cautious.

Move leg. Slow.

Move other leg. Slow.

Right rear leg left middle right front left rear right middle left front.

Slow.

Pause.

Move.

Slow.

Huge lives-moves-danger not moves.

Less close.

Next step less slow.

Move less slow.

Step. Step.

Tree trunk large closer.

Trunk close.

Trunk reached.

Move. Move.

Other side.

Other side.

Huge lives-moves-danger not moves.

Huge lives-moves-danger side not see.

Move fast.

Move.

Move up.

Move up up up fast fast fast.

Up up up.

Away away away.

Huge lives-moves-danger far below.

Huge lives-moves-danger not see.

Huge lives-moves-danger gone.

Away.

Gone.

Safe.

Safe.

Free.

Free.

Free.