

Tomas Tranströmer

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BELOW FREEZING

We are at a party that doesn't love us. Finally the party lets the mask fall and shows what it is: a shunting station for freight cars. In the fog cold giants stand on their tracks. A scribble of chalk on the car doors.

One can't say it aloud, but there is a lot of repressed violence here. That is why the furnishings seem so heavy. And why it is so difficult to see the other thing present: a spot of sun that moves over the house walls and slips over the unaware forest of flickering faces, a biblical saying never set down: "Come unto me, for I am as full of contradictions as you."

I work the next morning in a different town. I drive there in a hum through the dawning hour that resembles a dark blue cylinder. Orion hangs over the frost. Children stand in a silent clump, waiting for the school bus, the children no one prays for. The light grows gradually as our hair.

THE CLEARING

In the middle of the forest there's an unexpected clearing that can only be found by those who have gotten lost.

The clearing is surrounded by a forest that is choking itself. Black trunks with the lichen's bristly beard. The jammed trees are dead all the way to the top, there a few solitary green branches touch the light. Underneath: shadows sitting on the shadows, the marsh increasing.

But in the clearing the grass is curiously green and alive. Big stones lie around as if placed that way. They must have been foundation stones for a house, maybe I'm wrong. Who lived there? No one can help with that. The name sleeps somewhere in the archive no one opens (only archives remain young). The oral tradition is dead, and with it the memories. The gypsy tribe remembers, but those who can write forget. Write it down and forget it.

This little house hums with voices. It is the center of the world. But the people in it die or move away. The history ends. The place stands empty year after year. Ant he crofter's house becomes a sphinx. At the end everything has gone away except the foundation stones.

I've been here before somehow, but it's time to leave. I dive in among the briary underbrush. To get through it you have to take one step forward and two steps to the side, like a chess piece. Slowly it thins out and the light increases. My steps grow longer. A path wiggles its way toward me. I am back in the communications net.

On the humming high voltage pole a beetle sits in the sun. Under his gleaming shoulders his flight wings are lying, folded as ingeniously as a parachute packed by an expert.

STANDING UP

In a split second of hard thought, I managed to catch her. I stopped, holding the hen in my hands. Strange, she didn't really feel living: rigid, dry, an old white plume-ridden lady's hat that shrieked out the truths of 1912. Thunder in the air. An odor rose from the fence-boards, as when you open a photo album that has got so old that no one can identify the people any longer.

I carried her back in side the chicken netting and let her go. All of a sudden she came back to life, she knew who she was, and ran off according to the rules. Hen-yards are thick with taboos. But the earth all around is full of affection and tenacity. A low stone wall half-overgrown with leaves. When dusk begins to fall the stones are faintly luminous with the hundred-year-old warmth from the hands that built it.

It's been a hard winter, but summer is here and the fields want us to walk upright. Every man unimpeded, but careful, as when you stand up in a small boat. I remember a day in Africa: on the banks of the Chari, there were many boats, an atmosphere positively friendly, the men almost blue-black in color with three parallel scars on each cheek (meaning the Sara tribe). I am welcomed on a boat—it's a canoe hollowed from a dark tree. The canoe is incredibly wobbly, even when you sit on your heels. A balancing act. If you have the heart on the left side you have to lean a bit to the right, nothing in the pockets, no big arm movements, please, all rhetoric has to be left behind. Precisely: rhetoric is impossible here. The canoe glides out over the water.

THE BOOKCASE

It was moved out of the apartment after her death. It stood empty several days, before I put the books in, all the cloth-bound ones, the heavy ones. Somehow during it all I had also let some grave earth slip in. Something came from underneath, rose gradually and implacably like an enormous mercury column. A man was not to turn his head away.

The dark volumes, faces closed. They resembled the faces of those Algerians I saw at the zone border at Friedrichstrasse waiting for the East German People's Police to stamp their identity books. My own passbook lay for a long time in the glass cubicles. And the dusky air I saw that day in Berlin I see again in the bookcase. There is some ancient despair in there, that tastes of Passchendaele and the Versailles Peace Treaty, maybe even older than that. Those massive black tomes—I come back to them—they are in their way passports themselves, and they have got so thick because people have had to collect so many official stamps on them over centuries. Obviously a man can't overestimate the amount of baggage he's expected to have, now that it's starting to go, now that you finally...

All the old historians are there, they get their chance to stand up and see into our family life. You can't hear a thing, but the lips are moving all the time behind the pane ("Passchendaele"...). It reminds me of that tale of an ancient office building (this is a pure ghost story), a building where portraits of the long dead gentlemen hung on the wall behind glass, and one morning the office workers found some mist on the inside of the glass. The dead had begun to breathe during the night.

The bookcase is even stronger. Looks straight from zone one to the next! A glimmery skin, the glimmery skin on a dark river that the room has to see its own face in. And turning the head is not allowed.

AT FUNCHAL (*ISLAND OF MADEIRA*)

On the beach there's a seafood place, simple, a shack thrown up by survivors of the shipwreck. Many turn back at the door, but not the sea winds. A shadow stands deep inside his smoky hut frying two fish according to an old recipe from Atlantis, tiny garlic explosions, oil running over sliced tomatoes, every morsel says that the ocean wishes us well, a humming from the deep places.

She and I look into each other. It's like climbing the wild-flowered mountain slopes without feeling the least bit tired. We've sided with the animals, they welcome us, we don't age. But we have experienced so much together over the years, including those times when we weren't so good (as when we stood in line to give blood to the healthy giant—he said he wanted a transfusion), incidents which should have separated us if they hadn't united us, and incidents which we've totally forgotten—though they haven't forgotten us! They've turned to stones, dark and light, stones in a scattered mosaic. And now it happens: the pieces move toward each other, the mosaic appears and is whole. It waits for us. It glows down from the hotel-room wall, some figure violent and tender. Perhaps a face, we can't take it all in as we pull off our clothes.

After dusk we go out. The dark powerful paw of the cape lies thrown out into the sea. We walk in swirls of human beings, we are cuffed around kindly, among soft tyrannies, everyone chatters excitedly in the foreign tongue. "No man is an island." We gain strength from *them*, but also from ourselves. From what is inside that the other person can't see. That which can only meet itself. The innermost paradox, the underground garage flowers, the vent toward the good dark. A drink that bubbles in an empty glass. An amplifier that magnifies silence. A path that grows over after every step. A book that can only be read in the dark.