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In the Year of the Red Ox

De Arbeiderspers © 2020

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Land

1

Dusk stripped away the colors, laid them down elsewhere. I looked at the tall stalks of grass, a good three feet under the veranda, which moved as though invisible animals were fighting within it.

I drank my milk and watched a few insects skitter off in search of shelter.

I spilled the last dribs of milk onto the floor, the measly trickle spattered into tiny whitish specks. A few droplets vanished into the cracks between the crooked floor planks. The floor partook greedily.

Not only milk, but twigs, thumbtacks, small creatures, and always the rain disappeared into the dark recess under the house. My guess was that there were also bigger, all-embracing cracks, into which the lives of the sick and the old leaked before death cruelly set tongues wagging.

I smeared out the rest of the miniscule splotches with my sneakers and went inside.

My mother sat at the table with a large puzzle of the cathedral, she pulled me up against her and tousled my hair, then she told me she was pregnant.

My father drank coffee.

In the bathroom I soaped myself up like an East-European nurse. Industrious, mechanical, scrubbing the skin like a cupboard or like a floor. I thought of my immaculate skeleton.

I got into the bathtub to rinse myself off, the soapy water sloshed gently. I tossed in the wild herbs and flowers I had picked. Thyme, lemon balm, wild rose. The fluorescent light shone hard on the peaks of the suds, it ebbed slowly from the tub as the glistening soap bubbles softly imploded. Only the herbs and the rose were left.

I sat there until the water got cold and I had inspected, over and over, all the lines and stains on the ceiling. I knew some of the marks well, the horse, the clowns. A lasso.

When I pulled out the stopper I listened to the water swish in the pipes until it had disappeared completely. It seemed like the water had to follow an odd, far-too-long path. I peered into the drain.

My father beckoned when I went downstairs in my cotton nightie.

‘C’mere,’ he said. He was holding a comb.

‘Let me do that,’ and he turned me around so that I was facing the wall, I looked at the rough surface and made myself tall.

My father placed the Bakelite comb against the skin of the scalp and followed my hair that smelled like gypsy tea.

I enjoyed this ritual, our ritual, my father hardly touching me, hardly paying attention to me, but all the more so to my hair, he hated when it got gnarled or was oily. He kept it tight and tidy, like archives.

I stared at my white socks and heard the radio, my mother was talking on the phone about the baby with an exuberance I did not care for, her movements made me think of spiders in a laboratory who are given drugs and then spin the most amazing webs.

This was how my mother moved.

It was like all the pins in the room made a fearsomely high-pitched screech before stabbing my scalp.

I leapt up, yelping, my father had hit a gnarl.

In bed I thought about the child.

It was a strange thought, having to get a baby brother or sister. Exciting and horrible at the same time. It made me restless.

I thought of my mother and her belly, I thought of my mother making love with my father, I thought about various animals and wrote in my notebook:

‘My mother is going to have a baby, this will be my parents’ second child, maybe that child is way too small to be born, maybe it will disappear through the crack just like the thumbtacks, pebbles and nails. I don’t know which I would like more, a brother or a sister.’ And under that, in bigger letters: ‘Actually, preferably a goat.’

I slid the notebook under my mattress.

I lay on my back, eyes wide open, I studied the room at nighttime, I listened to all the creaking, I heard water run through the pipes a few times, I heard the radio and I heard a car.

I thought about a number of things: making fifty race cars all go at once, the smooth green leaves in the yard, my nails growing. I looked at the clock, I waited for it to jump to the 3 and imagined that every time a number changed it would be accompanied by a quiet tinkling of glass. The numbers became blurry and slowly vanished, I only just heard the door slide open, a hand touched my forehead.

Lasso

1

It was the year the summer tipped.

It went gradually. You know how these things go. First there are the signs no one sees, then someone writes it up in the paper and the fuss starts.

Quite a complex form burst open, and pus, crumbs, debris, purulence landed all over the floor, what a mess. And anybody who'd had a smattering of physics crept out of their attic and went blathering in the studio. It was interesting television, because the further along the broadcast, the more petrified the audience and the paler the presenter. Everyone depressed homeward. Frightened in the car, frightened to bed.

I reckon GGD (Gradual Gravitation Deprivation) affects the brain, because people are easily panicked and peevish. Not me.

I enjoy the lightness in my feet. It catapults me straight to a playground in the late 1980s. In a stretch-knit dress with gooey stains on a squeaky swing set. Neck extended, head back, Go. As long as it takes for everything to spin, down becomes up, up becomes down. I'm into distortions like these. A strange tingling in your body. We are the crumbs on the dress of the universe. The butterfly awakens and is a monk. *The Truman Show*. I seriously consider the possibility of a hologram.

So anyway, I walked home. I saw the trees slowly waving their branches, I liked that, I was really into waving branches. I even went around with a camera in my coat pocket from March until June that year and was constantly stopping to film the branches. I had collected a lot of material, y'know, and watched it all in sequence, saliva dripping from my chin, and chill, chill! No, seriously, it's incredibly peaceful. You're in another time, giraffe time. Galloping across the savanna in slow motion. Slowly bending at the neck.

There were lots of joggers in the park. Some doomsters had already fastened their child to the bike, the baby to the stroller, the dog to the hand, and so on. I'll bet rope sales have had a banner year. Why not, because aside from the short-lived craze of bondage and sailing (in certain circles, of course) it doesn't strike me as a particularly flourishing sector.

I went to the shop and that's where I saw him. His wild hair like feathers, oily and unruly. No kidding, he looked just like a bird. It immediately triggered bird feelings within me. When you're as fixated on branches as I am, you understand, birds are the logical next step. For who sits on those swishing, swooshing branches so cool and unfazed? Birds.

I checked out his clothes. Looked good. I checked out his face. Okay.

When it really counts, I can be very decisive. I left my groceries and followed the Bird.

The way someone walks says it all. If you observe carefully, you'll notice everything. Take Nina, my neighbor. Dispatches her legs straight onto the street without a second thought, lets her hands grasp objects willy-nilly, her thoughts literally follow the grooves in her head.

She was born without access to her body, nor any desire to adjust this. Maybe she's another species of human. Possibly a species that, a few lifetimes ago, was still 'thing'. A soap box, radio, table. Just accepting that everyone slides you aside and puts you away and forgets and bumps into you. Submit to thingness, never have the urge to walk away from it.

Bird, on the other hand, walked like he knew what he was doing. He occupies his body completely; if you ask me, he could probably make his bowels move on command. His gait resolute, slightly springy. His head erect.

He appeared headed for a particularly seedy part of town. Not that I minded, because I always feel invincible. Although when the concentration of French-kissing whores behind the fences increased, I started to feel a tad uncomfortable, but okay. I held my bag tighter, its long strap slung diagonally across my chest like a machine gun, you know what I mean, and my fists stuffed in my pockets like tense young animals. There they could do their tense young animal thing, my face remained deadpan.

I was distracted by the occasional waving branch, almost gave in to the desire to take out the camera and film it, but Bird's quick pace and the complicated street layout forced me to concentrate.

What should I do when he stopped somewhere? Speak to him? Was simple eye contact enough? I was so on my guard that my heart started thumping in every finger, every toe. No kidding, it beat in my groin against the fabric of my pants. In the veins in my eyes, it even hurt.

Just then, it happened. A 'gravity lapse' – that's how that day went down in history. It was weird, suddenly I fell upwards. It was a desperate fall into the air. It was an abyss and a heaven all at once.

And with me, up went everything that wasn't tied down. People, bikes, cars, everything on the street lifted itself up, and in the same second the street sank, damn fickle thing. The street fell into an abyss, vanished beneath our feet.

And the racket! Furniture bashing against the ceilings of houses. Cupboards shrugging their shoulders. The table with plates, cutlery, and slices of bread, smack against the ceiling. A muffled shout. The bonk of a skull.

So there we hung, ten seconds maybe, we couldn't come down, we hung, we did not understand.

I swear to you, we hung, devoid of thoughts, in a field, a field of immense silence. It didn't occur to anyone to scream, perhaps a bike bumped into another bike. Gravel bounced off a car.

It was as though we were at once lifted up to our dream consciousness, struck dumb. The animals went silent, too, out of respect. I looked at a car suspended next to me, its wheels still turning, but even they went quiet. The driver, for the occasion, put on his most idiotic expression. I saw a girl on a bicycle, her feet pedaled mechanically but then stopped. I saw a dog, so peaceful.

And then suddenly falling.

Things clattering.

I smacked into a bicycle. Where'd that come from? We crashed to the ground. It was a hard fall, my tailbone hurt.

I looked straight into Bird's eyes. We sat on the sidewalk, dazed. Although we had contact with the ground, it didn't feel all that dependable, the body still felt so light, so light. And up we went again, flew away.

I scabbled about in Nothingness, in the air, and I found the Bird, we held onto each other, so tight that it hurt. That hovering was neat and dreadful at the same time. We had no point of reference. My thoughts resumed, this time I heard the car make start-up noises, the driver clutched his steering wheel. Loose dirt from neglected gardens, gravel hung between us. We looked, everywhere there were cars and people, sand, folding chairs, bicycles, roof tiles, water. Material from the earth, risen to look at one another.

I thought of the swing set. I was too transfixed by swinging, and the plank and the rope had vanished. The plank and the rope had vanished.

Letters to the condor

Mi amado cóndor

Beloved condor, wild black flower in the sky, in the trees, I write to you.

You are it; I was once you. Once, I also had black feathers, flowing like a black waterfall over my smooth head, I dove into the air, grasped hold of the wind, and shot through evening's glow, soaring on the wind. I was truly a stunning bird. Majestic! I had many brothers and sisters, I had many children. Plenty to eat.

Something must have happened, perhaps I caught sight of a human being going about his business, tending to his boat, his hut, or in an embrace with another, maybe I saw children playing, running across the open space, or among the waving stalks, and somewhere there was a sudden yearning to feel that. An earth-wanderer, a creature with two legs with which to run or dance, swim.

That brief desire was enough for my soul, curious as a mouse, to find its way to a human being, to choose the moment when a human man and a human woman are together, to leap into the conception and grow into a human embryo. Oh, how strange it was to be inside a creature without those imperial wings. I suffered growth pains, screamed unheard inside the belly of my human mother. To the rhythm of her heartbeat, I plotted my disappearance. I would rotate out of the body as though in a giant wheel, that's possible, condor my dearest condor, you know it is.

My mother had it hard, too, I felt it, my discomfort became hers, she was nauseous, dizzy, routinely lay in bed. At certain times she threw curses as me, at other times, endearments. I decided to stay.

My curiosity won.

Yes, that is my nature. When I was a condor, too, I always wanted to fly farther: what lies behind those mountains, how far is the sea? I studied the animals, the landscape. So inquisitive that it was a thirst, wanting to drink from everything.

And now, in that human form, I was fascinated with the arms, the legs, how to move them, I was enormously intrigued by running, crawling, swimming. I continued to grow. I thrashed about in the belly. Flew without wings in her waters.

I listened to the leaves grow, to the falling of rain on rocks, in my memory at least—in the belly all I heard was my mother's heartbeat, the blood being pumped through the veins, it sounded like the rush of water in some network of pipes, and the breathing like a sea, yes that, like a sea... *la música*, drums and flutes, the voice of my father, too, of course, oh just a moment my dear condor, the baby is crying.

I must feed her, my husband will be home soon, I feel him a few blocks away, the house is a mess, I must tidy up, the baby, the baby wants milk.

Tinkunakama, my winged friend, I will write again later.

I embrace you.

Dear condor,

I have an intense longing for my wings. I am accustomed to moving like a human, but it goes slowly. Walking, running—yes, of course I can do that, was easier as a child, you're made of elastic, malleable as wax, somersaulting wildly with my brothers and sisters. You spring from rocks and walls and land in the grass, the earth catches you, sometimes you gouge open your knee.

But I'm older now, and slower. My pregnancy was, like my mother's, a difficult one. I'm not as fit as I once was.

If I want to be quick, I need something with wheels, a car or a bus. I don't have a bicycle, in this village women aren't supposed to cycle, it's still a mystery to me why. Women here are treated like sick animals, ignorant, inept. Although I can do anything, and moreover am perfectly capable of riding a bicycle, I know this because my brother taught me how. Sometimes I still take my husband's, if I need to be somewhere urgently and am running late. I whiz down the street, my baby wrapped in a blanket on my back. I am not afraid, I laugh heartily.

The townspeople disapprove. At times someone will give you a nudge or admonishment. My husband forbids me to cycle, so cowed is he by the masses. My husband is often afraid that my inborn spirit will be my undoing. I ignore it. Wear trousers if I feel like it, while women are expected to wear long skirts. Tough luck, *a la mierda*.

Who thought that up?

I am wild and free.

My husband prefers to keep me at home. Dictates odd jobs in and around the house. He wants me to help his mother with her weaving, she is one of the region's best *tejedoras*. I'm not good at it, I prick my finger, make ragged edges, I don't have the knack, my fingers are just rougher. What I am good at is making tea. With fresh herbs I pick in the meadow. I invent my own concoctions of herbs and berries, sometimes the bark of the tipuana tree, it's good for cramps. I wander through the fields to gather herbs, collect pollen. My friends all like to drink my tea. I also paint well; I paint the house. The stairs. The neighbors', too. I am a good dancer, I float through the dance

hall, shake my body, *carajo*, as though I have feathers again. Black, dark feathers shimmying in the flickering light.

So I miss wings, my feathered friend. When you fly off to the mountaintops today, fly a little higher for me, a little farther. Point your beak into the wind and soar! Send me the sensation in your feathers, in your head, I'm sure I'll be able to pick something up, even if it's just at night in a dream. I long to fly, oh my dear friend, *querido ave* I am eternally grateful to you!

When I dance to rousing rhythm of the drum, tonight when I leave my baby with my mother, I will send it, that sensation, to you. I know you will enjoy it. Dancing is like flying, you surrender to it, you feel the waves and rhythms, not of the wind but of the music. Its vibrations surround your body, I cannot help but move along with it. The music throbs in your belly, heavy strokes of the drumsticks in your belly, echoing through your back to your throat and heart, your joints throb loose, your cells awaken—a most agreeable feeling. Dancing always makes me thirsty, for a man. But I will contain myself, do not want a new baby, having a baby is hard work.

Do you have a new baby, dear friend? Do you have a partner? A nest? Tell me, dearest, how you are, I am so curious, I must leave you now, I'm going to make dinner.

Your devoted friend