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Stories in English Translation

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Short stories
from

TINGENES UORDEN
(DISORDER OF THINGS)

and

GRUMME HISTORIER
(GRIM STORIES)

THE FISH SHOP OWNER'S WIFE

There was something about the fish shop owner's wife that made me think she herself was turning into a fish. Even though the transformation happened slowly and painfully and over a period of years, it was on a cold day in December, early in the process, that I first came to realize what was about to take place. It was a presentiment but it didn't make the events less eerie. I knew what was happening as the events were unfolding right before my eyes.

The fish shop stands on the broad and busy shopping street that twists from the northern end of town toward the southeast. The street itself undergoes a transformation from its origin in the traditional neighborhoods with their tiny, dingy kiosks and sellers of lottery tickets and tobacco, into the vibrant Arab quarter with its Turkish delights, hairdressers, and shops full of silk and taffeta. In the middle of this street the fish shop stood as if it constituted a threshold between two worlds. Its presence was so quiet and discreet that people who had been living in its close vicinity for years, and who passed it many times during the day, never even noticed it and bought their fish instead at the supermarket or over the Internet. The façade was covered with tiny black and gray tiles; above the entrance a sign announced "fish & game" in red capitals.

The first time I became aware of her transformation was just before New Year's Day 2005. I went to the shop to buy some fillets of cod, as is our custom for New Year's, and I couldn't help noticing how the shop owner's wife moved as if

the air consisted of water. She seemed to pull herself past the counter, negotiated the edge of the table, and propelled herself across the room, toward the window where the cod was displayed.

The actual selection of the cod, which involved delicately placing the pieces in a small, transparent bag, and her subsequent retreat to the scales behind the counter, consumed so much time that her husband, the fish shop owner, was able to serve two customers, one of whom had insisted upon a tedious and time consuming filleting of his order.

None of the other customers seemed to notice the bizarre conduct of the shop owner's wife. It wasn't just her steps that were tentative and sluggish - as when people bathing in the sea try to sprint through the water. No, all her movements were subject to the same watery impression - the way she turned her head, the motion of her hand as it grabbed the fillets and lifted them up from the tray, as if the fish, the hand, and everything about her were subject to underwater laws. It seemed that the entire shop had become a gigantic aquarium around her.

Her appearance was also marked by what was happening. Her hair was short, reddish and rippled, giving the impression of a helmet of roe. Her figure was squat, and her skin the palest white, almost glossy like the belly of a fish. I never saw her wear make-up except on her eyelids, which she painted in a bold bright blue. But it was the matte, staring circles of the eyes that was the most sensational aspect of the fish shop owner's wife. Never, in all the years I bought fish at the shop - not even once - did I see her blink those sea-colored eyes, their irises constantly shifting in shade as if reflecting a watery world.

The husband had a characteristically ruddy gruffness, which possibly served to insulate him from the

appalling change his wife was undergoing. When the two of them moved about in the shop, it was as if they no longer thought about one another's presence. As time had gone by, their social routines had turned into something more like a ritual necessity than a true loving relationship, as when at certain holidays we mechanically perform such and such expected activities accompanied by such and such expected words.

Nevertheless, when in the shop I always sensed a certain watchfulness on the part of the shopkeeper, which revealed itself if I viewed his wife with too unveiled an interest, a watchfulness I did not interpret as anything other than care and an attempt to build a discreet but effective fence around his peculiar wife.

Three quarters of a year passed by before I again stepped onto the shop's cool, gray tiles. This time I had come to buy some smoked cod roe. As before, the shopkeeper's wife embarked on her laborious journey from behind the counter, over the sawdust-covered tiles toward the heaps in the window. But as she passed me in the middle of the floor, I noted with a hardly audible gasp that she had, in the intervening time, developed something that looked like gills just under the curve of her jaw. The new features in question were barely visible slits, which during her interminable voyage expanded and contracted like tiny mouths, gaping, grasping hungrily for oxygen and collapsing again so that the openings almost disappeared. She took longer than usual to wrap the cod roe in newspaper and punch the numbers into the cash register. Glancing at the shopkeeper during this torpid performance, I became aware that his covertly protective posture had grown more intense and apprehensive since my last visit.

It was not only the defensive net he cast about his wife. Nor was it merely his surreptitious way of protecting her from

my curious stares - as for instance when he wound a rubber band around a fish wrapped in newspaper, making a gruff snap to disorient my attention and bring it back to the everyday practical world. It was also an inner defense against his own full realization of what was taking place. I found it doubly strange to watch them together, the husband with his attentive non-attentiveness, and the wife already living more of her life in the other world.

Sometimes, when I went for a walk in the neighborhood, I made it a point to pass by the fish shop. Standing outside the window to look at the goods, I let my eyes to wander from the trays to see how far the shop keeper's wife had progressed in her transformation, how close she was to becoming a fish. It was again as if I were looking into an aquarium when I saw how she moved about, blue-aproned and fishlike. But the sea-change was incredibly slow, and sometimes I doubted my senses, questioning whether I had really seen what I thought I had. I reached for explanations of the kind that would satisfy science: that she was walking-impaired, that the gills were healing scars, that she never blinked because of a miscommunication of some nerves.

When I saw the fish shop owner's wife for the last time, nearly a year and a half had passed since she sold me the cod fillets. I went to the shop to buy the makings for fish fritters: ground fish, some remoulade sauce, and a half pound of crab salad. I prefer the fish to be freshly ground, so what I asked for was no simple exercise: first choosing the fish from the window, then processing it in the blender, and finally loading two plastic cups with the desired quantity of crab salad and remoulade sauce. It was a long and tiring affair for the fish shop owner's wife. After a certain time, I seriously doubted that she would carry through. The fish shop owner looked at me from the

corner of his eye several times during her journey. These were not looks of solidarity nor glances asking me to bear with his wife. Rather, they served to read my reaction, to fence in the wife and thereby protect her from the thoughts he imagined me to think. During the entire expedition, which lasted about half an hour, the wife said nothing. Not until she had added up my bill at the cash register, did she open her mouth to announce the amount I owed. She looked at me as directly as she could with the enlarged matte disks that were her eyes. No words came from her mouth, but instead she expelled a large, brilliantly clear bubble, which, for a brief moment, stuck to her lower lip, vibrating before it let go and floated through the room, rising to the ceiling and bursting on contact with a distinct pop. The entire shop fell silent. All but one had followed the ascent of the bubble and had shared a little shock with its pop. Only the shopkeeper's wife had not experienced this awakening but maintained her unaffected, frosty stare. She tried yet another time to open her mouth, but this time the owner broke in with "That'll be 11.69, please." I was still completely lost in the spectacle of that bubble and wanted more than anything else to see another. But I paid up and walked home with my fish, full of wonder and wild thoughts.

Shortly thereafter, I visited the shop again in the hope of seeing the fish shop owner's wife produce another bubble. But this time she wasn't there. Only the owner's stocky shape moved among his aquatic wares, with the poetry of old women peeling potatoes. I wanted to ask him what had happened to his wife, but I didn't know him that well, and I was afraid he would take offense. So I placed my order, two whole red snappers and a nice French brand of fish stock. It was not until he handed me my purchase that I gathered the courage to ask.

He didn't have to answer: in his eyes I saw what had happened. I read it in the reflection of their curved, sad stare.

One night not long after the incident of the bubble, he was awakened by the strangely grating sound of his wife's breathing. In the moonlight from the window he saw how the tiny gill mouths gasped for breath; it had never happened before, not like this.

In the morning, the couple always opened the shop together. According to their routine, the wife cut the lemons, put ice in the window, stacked the newspaper for the wrapping, and prepared the salads, while the owner drove to the harbor, picked up the fresh fish, and brought it back to the shop in his van. Because of the wife's difficulty in penetrating the impassable medium that the air had become for her, by now it took longer for her to complete these simple tasks than it did for her husband to drive all the way to the harbor, haggle with the fishermen, and drive back. By now, it had become an expected part of the routine that when he returned, he had to help his wife finish her chores. But not this morning. When the shopkeeper returned from the harbor with two large boxes full of the day's catch, he saw a gigantic fish lying in the middle of his tiled shop floor, twisting and turning. The fish shop owner thought he was able to identify every kind of fish, but this one – he had never seen such a fish before. Like most ocean fish, it had a dark back and light belly. But what was most unusual about this particular fish – other than its size – was the reddish head with remarkable blue markings around the eyes. All in all, it measured about four feet from mouth to tail and could easily feed a dozen families. Were he to grind it up and make paste for fish fritters, he could fill up the large freezer and be amply supplied for a month or more.

But despite the fish shop owner's otherwise brusque and practical approach to life, he didn't think any of these thoughts. He made eye contact with the fish while it lay suffering on his shop floor, and he was struck by the humanity in it that he recognized. There was something oddly familiar about the fish. He sensed that it was a bit embarrassed – not on behalf of itself but for him. There was no time to waste. The shop owner dropped the boxes, ran to the fish and grabbed it with both arms. His arms barely reached around it. It twisted violently, as if in death spasms, and was incredibly heavy, with nearly the weight of a grown woman. Then, clutching the strange fish awkwardly, the fish shop owner ran with a jolting gait to the van and wrestled his burden into the passenger's seat. He sped through the city, careless of traffic lights and surrounding vehicles. Although by nature disinclined to sentiment and spirituality, the fish shop owner was nevertheless driven by a sense of superhuman urgency and importance in the survival of this fish. Finally reaching the harbor where the fishermen had begun to close up shop for the day, he stopped the van with squealing brakes. The eyes of the startled by-standers followed him as he ran around the van, opened the door and grabbed something the fishermen could not see. As he turned away from the car's open door and revealed his companion, eyes opened wide and jaws dropped. None of the fishermen had ever seen anything like this.

The fish shop owner ran toward the quay to an empty spot where no fishing boats were moored, and without any sentimentality he threw the still weakly floundering fish into the water. It made a gigantic splash when its belly hit the sea, and the fishermen ran from their boxes and nets to get closer views of the large creature. Only the bravest among them had ever dared to dream of catching such a prize. The fish shop owner

also remained; he saw that the fish lived, but he didn't hear the questions from the fishermen as he watched the fish swim outwards, further and further away from the coast towards the deep water. Perhaps he hoped it would swim so far that the fishermen's boats would never be able to reach it. But he couldn't know, and every morning when he showed up by the harbor in his van, he was filled with a silent, cold terror that he would find a huge fish for sale with a red head and blue markings around its eyes.

All of this, I saw in the curve of his iris. It was the last time I visited the shop.

From *Grumme historier*, 2011.(Grim Stories).

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“The Fish Shop Owners Wife” was published in *Iowa Review*, fall 2007 and reprinted in *Discoveries: New Writing from The Iowa Review* in 2012.

THE AMBASSADOR

I bought the mirror from an old Jew at the Porta Portese Market in Rome. It was not the mirror itself that caught my eye as much as the golden frame, which was wrapped in a dusty blanket and stuck out from a trunk behind his stall. So as not to act too eager, I feigned interest in a rusty coin collection and a bronze letterpress shaped like a winged phallus before I nonchalantly let my eyes wander over to the trunk. “How much for that old mirror?” I asked. The Jew chewed on a wet cigar stump, sizing up my interest. He walked over and pulled the mirror from the trunk. I didn’t bite. Instead I began mindlessly leafing through a box of risqué postcards from the early 1800s.

“Hundred,” he said. “Fifty,” I replied, not looking up.

I dragged the mirror home, still wrapped in the blanket, for 65 euros. It was antique, oval, faceted, and mounted in a gilded wooden frame engraved with clustering snakes. The mirror was opulent, tasteless even, but that was precisely what I liked. It fit with Rome’s over-the-top pageant of gold, heavy jewelry everywhere, gold watches and brass buckles and buttons and shiny cuff links. And it fit the lavish style of the ambassador residence, a genteel 19th-century house in Centro Storico with 20-foot ceilings and stone floors and niches adorned with cool marble youths.

The mirror found its way to the longest wall in the dining room, the top hanging loosely forward, leaning into the room like an old lady who has lost her hearing. I had no plans to use it as an actual mirror – I preferred not to sit and chew in the company of myself on the opposing wall – but I wanted it

there, I suppose, as an abstract image. So I dipped it slightly toward the oval table until it sparkled blindly like a diamond in cliff. I was content.

The dining room was filled with guests almost every night. Conversation was always lively, ideas flowed from the mouths of educated people with stimulating views on life, and these ideas made their way through the room alongside multi-course dinners of creamy soups, oven-baked fish, duck with red cabbage and sugar-browned potatoes, Southern Jutland apple pie, and *vini superiori* served in hand-blown Holmegaard glasses. This entertaining was an obligation of my profession – but I truly enjoyed it. On the rare nights I spent alone, I didn't know what to do with myself, and usually ended up on a kitchen stool eating toast with cheese or jam, restlessly skimming through junk mail catalogues.

I was fully aware that my life was not my own. I remember Madeleine Albright once talking about her nerves when, as U.S. Ambassador to the U.N., she addressed the assembly for the first time. As she sat in that hall full of black-suited men and summoned the courage to speak, the insight came in a crystal spark: *I am America!* The personal anxieties of Madeleine Albright were completely irrelevant.

As Madeleine Albright was America, I was Denmark. And so it was not Birgit Tranholm sitting at the end of the table in the candelabra-lit dining room under the mirror greasing the conversation between world powers – it was Denmark. I never let myself believe the guests were *my* guests. Just as a soldier has no face, is not an individual, the ambassador is never anything but the ambassador. An ambassador can have no friends; she is chronically lonesome.

It was also the Ambassador who spoke at these gatherings. I couldn't sit there and say anything I pleased, but this suited me fine. What would Birgit Tranholm say anyway, had she suddenly been asked to speak? Certainly nothing about

her lonely nights on the kitchen stool. A strong sense of etiquette and erudition must accompany the privilege of diplomatic immunity. On Ambassador Tranholm's night table lay tall stacks of poetry books and philosophical and theological texts; she went to the opera and to the theater, and she kept herself well-versed in all the subjects educated people keep themselves well-versed in.

I don't know whether the others realized their lives weren't theirs. This was not a subject we discussed. I recognized my loneliness only in the ambassador, a shortish man with silver hair combed back and cut neatly above his ear, and a clean, reddish face. He looked as if he was he were visiting from the 1920s. His shirts, usually short-sleeved with old-fashioned pleated breast pockets, were carefully starched and ironed, and every little fold meticulously pressed. There was something sad and dreamy about him. When he spoke, it was as if his eyes saw things in the distance that only he could see.

He was not like the boring career diplomats, but a classic intellectual. He had a background in theology and could speak easily and at length about symbolic language in the Bible. Where did the dove come from, and why a dove? From a small beginning like this he would segue into a genuine lecture on the subject, and move in an elegant but intellectually demanding arc from Noah's dove in the Old Testament to the dove that descended from heaven at the baptism of Jesus. During these monologues I sometimes tried to catch his eye – not the eyes of the Polish Ambassador, but the light blue, far-seeing eyes of Mihael. I wanted to see whether his loneliness saw mine.

It was on one such night that I noticed the whole scene repeat itself in the mirror. I don't know why I'd never seen it before, perhaps the fishing line had grown slack, altering the angle of the mirror a bit, but in any case, from where I sat it was no

longer a blind frame, but a perfect doubling of the guests, the dinner, the flickering candles of the candelabra, with one disturbing exception: I couldn't find myself. I could clearly see the silver neck of the Polish ambassador and then the South African ambassador and his wife, and across the table I reencountered the Polish poet Mihael had brought along, as well as the leader of the Danish Institute in the Borghese Garden, two Italian artists, a theatre manager, and an art critic – all of whom sat captivated by Mihael and his little lecture. I counted the seats, and there, squarely between the theatre manager and the art critic, I saw a strange, new face – in my seat! The face was paler and longer than my own, with grey-black hair pulled back in a bun, and the eyes seemed dead and small and nearsighted. A quick glimpse, and then – the face was gone. Mihael had finished his speech and the guests were holding their glasses in mid-air, waiting for me to toast the dove.

The wife of the South African ambassador started talking about the secretary bird, supposedly an essential part of the South African coat of arms, and from there the conversation expanded to other birds and their symbolic meanings: swans, storks, crows, cranes, eagles, owls, ravens and, of course, the phoenix. But I didn't speak. I couldn't focus.

The evening came to a strange end. My guests left little by little before coffee was served. I didn't see anyone out, but just sat like a stone until I was the only one left. The Polish ambassador and his poet friend were the last to go. The ambassador placed his hand on my shoulder and bowed, kissing me twice on each cheek. He thanked me for a nice evening. I knew his words were not true, I looked up and met his eyes, and now *he* looked at *me* as if he was searching for something, my loneliness, perhaps. I looked away and the two of them left. I didn't move from the chair until the candles had burned to puddles, and the servants had been excused and gone home. I

left the remains of the oven-roasted lamb and the dirty plates on the table, and went to bed. Whoever fell asleep in my bed that night was not the same person who had welcomed guests a few hours earlier.

When I awoke the next morning, I shrugged the whole incident off as a result of too much tension, high-strung nerves – candles had flickered, there had been wine, and perhaps I also had a headache. I convinced myself that I had not seen what I had seen.

The dinner parties grew fewer and fewer in the following months. Evenings in the kitchen became routine. I lost weight. Also, my wardrobe changed. I'd always had a confident style, well-dressed and professional, and a closet full of tailored bouclé suits in monochromes, skirts with matching jackets – the attire expected of a woman with diplomatic obligations. But a few weeks after the dinner party incident, I found myself in a shop for – I didn't even know what to call it. Antique garments? Secondhand clothes? I left the shop carrying a high-necked dress with a white lace collar that made me look like a 19th-century governess. Back home I tried on the dress in front of my bedroom mirror. I didn't like myself in it, it reminded me of the woman who sat alone at night on the kitchen stool, solving puzzles. Yet there was also an inexplicable, trembling pleasure in my discomfort, and I kept the dress on. Like a closed umbrella, it covered the body that grew skinnier with each passing week. During the day I answered questions from home, whether Danish tourists should cancel their vacations due to this strike or that, and in the evenings I rattled around in the hallways like a beetle, alone.

At the next dinner party I received my guests in the high-necked dress. I'd forgotten to change, and by the time I was standing in the doorway, it was too late. I must have made a harrowing impression: people seemed momentarily disturbed by my looks, but had the tact not to say anything.

The first part of the evening followed the usual scheme. The appetizer was accompanied by a light wine and easy conversation. But during the main course, I suddenly sensed that I was being watched. I looked around at the dinner guests, the Polish ambassador was staring into the distance, explaining the insignificance of the historic Jesus in comparison with the mythic. Everyone's attention was fixed on him. I looked up at the mirror, and there I met the gaze of the long-faced woman, same pale skin, same pulled-back hair. There was a recognition in her eyes, as if she had read my mind, as if she knew something I didn't.

There was a scream. The tablecloth darkened. Blood streamed from my hand, broken glass everywhere – I must have clenched my wine glass so hard it shattered. The gentleman sitting next to me, a polite English chargé de affaires, made attempts to remove the shards from my palm, but the slivers of glass had cut too deep into the flesh.

The Polish ambassador offered to drive me to the emergency room. He was driving himself, he didn't have a chauffeur for the night, and it was impossible to find a parking space at the hospital. But he took advantage of diplomatic immunity and left the car on the square in front of a small chapel. We both knew what kind of favor this was, but he didn't say a word as he opened the passenger door. I especially remember the feeling of shame as we ran across the square together, Mihael impeccable with his silver hair and neatly ironed shirt and me in that impossible black dress, bony ankles poking down, bleeding hand sticking up. The woman running was not me, she only appeared to be. I couldn't hide.

The doctor spent the bulk of the night removing the shards, one by one, with tweezers and a magnifying glass. I returned home with a bandaged hand and advice to take it easy. Two days later, the ambassador came by with a box of Polish biscuit-cake and a little book bound in exquisite red cloth,

Metaphysics for Beginners, poems by the Polish poet who had been my guest the night I first saw the face in the mirror. We each sat on the edge of a dining room chair, me with my greasy hair and worn dressing gown, he in his freshly pressed linen trousers, poplin shirt, and gold cross. The situation was awkward and unequal, and yet a new space had arisen between us. I wouldn't call it friendship, not exactly, but something in his presence penetrated the usual layers of formality. He began to talk about Eros. We give all the power to reason, he said, claim that we're 'rational people,' when the truth is that in the face of Eros, reason is powerless. It was clear that in his 'we' he included all humankind. We could choose to walk away from the burning bush, he said, but if we walked into it armed with only our 'good sense,' we would burn to ashes. Eros made the real decisions, and reason did the explaining. Eros is always the Emperor, he said, and looked at me expectantly.

Now, in retrospect, I don't remember what I said. It was the woman from the mirror who spoke, and I remember only as one could in the midst of a terrible hangover – or a dream, a nightmare: the image of the Polish ambassador with tears in his distant blue eyes. And me, the mirror-woman, and then the ambassador leaving with a very straight back. Even as I sat on the edge of my dining room chair, I knew that this would be the last I would see of the ambassador.

After he left, I fell asleep on the chair. I don't know for how long. I woke lying on the oval mahogany table, head on arm, stiff all over. I must have cried too, my cheeks felt dry and salty, but I didn't remember what I had dreamt: only the terrible feeling of having lost something precious. It was terrible, terrible. I looked up at the mirror, and staring at me were the triumphant eyes of the pale horse face.

I could think of only one thing. Who had owned the mirror before me? Who had seen their reflection in the glass?

The old Jew didn't have his stall at the Porta Portese anymore. In its place was a shop that sold brightly colored microfiber underwear. The young owners told me the Jew had sold his space and moved to Genoa. They thought it was Genoa. Some city by the water, they were sure of this.

I went to Genoa. After three days scouring every antique seller in the city, I found him in a shop by the harbor. I asked if he remembered me. He narrowed his eyes, staring for a long time. "You sold me a mirror once," he said. "Wrong," I said. "You once sold *me* a mirror." He then nodded slowly. I asked if he remembered who had sold it to him. He didn't – he already said, he thought I was the one. "You must have some papers, some lists of bought and sold objects." I tried. The Jew stared at me. "I trade in old things," he said, "not diamonds."

I'm not sure what I had expected, but the Jew was my best bet, and really my only bet. Even if I managed to track down the person who owned the mirror before me, what would I have done? Seen the person, I suppose. Satisfied my curiosity.

All I could do was return to Rome and rid myself of the mirror. As soon as I got home, I took it from the wall and placed it on the floor, turning its reflective surface to face the wall, as if shaming it somehow. Then I placed a classified ad in the newspaper: "Antique mirror for sale." That was all I wrote.

There was only one inquiry, a woman, who over the phone asked in detail about measurements, shape, ornaments, frame. It seemed I was just as eager to be free of the mirror as she was to own it. After I described it, she asked if she could fetch the mirror herself. Could she come right away? She certainly could.

The woman came. As she climbed the staircase, I stood in the doorway to receive her. She emerged in stages: first the grey-speckled bun, then the face, pale and horse-like, hovering over the governess dress, and finally the bony, stalk-like ankles

and laced-up shoes. Neither of us spoke upon sight of the other. “You have a mirror for sale?” she said. “Yes,” I replied.

I agreed immediately to her price. She had only small, used notes, and counted them three times before handing them over. “Sometimes they stick.” Her voice sounded like wind rustling through dry leaves. In the hallway light her face looked yellow against the black dress. She put me in a dreadful mood. All I wanted was for her to leave and take the mirror. Finally she picked it up and maneuvered it into place under her arm – and before she turned to go, she gazed at me for a moment with the triumphant expression I had seen before. As if she *knew*. But there were no words. There was only the sound of her heels, clippety-clop, down the stone staircase, pointed steps that echoed long after she was gone.

From *Grumme historier*, 2011. (Grim Stories).

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Translation © Colie Hoffman and Mathilde Walter Clark, 2014.

“The Ambassador” appeared in *Asymptote*, 2015.

<http://www.asymptotejournal.com/special-feature/mathilde-walter-clark-the-ambassador/>

THE SWAN

Aside from the fact that Bi Feiyu was bowlegged and that his dental anatomy could at best be described as “dramatic,” he was truly a lucky man. A great and indescribable happiness had befallen him. He had been the first in his family to get the opportunity to go to university, but now he had also received a special award. He had been selected from among tens of thousands of students in his province for further studies in Edinburgh Scotland, a pink blob in a larger turquoise named England, in the northern part of Europe, far away from Yunnan. Edinburgh Scotland, sources said, was a particularly fine place on the turquoise continent, with a particularly fine university, Edinburgh University, or the University of Edinburgh, one or the other, whose mathematics faculty had a good reputation, and mathematics was Bi Feiyu’s subject. There was nothing to suggest that Bi Feiyu should have special aptitude in this regard, as his father was employed in a public office and his mother worked in a chicken slaughterhouse, but as the gods go along in their calculus, things sometimes deviate from the initial sketch.

When the big day came for Bi Feiyu to leave for Edinburgh Scotland, there was a grand family party to which every possible relative was invited, as well as neighbors, university professors, and anyone who might have a stake in the fortunate event. The father gave a short, tender speech, something he had never done before, and it would probably have lasted longer had it not been for the presence of university professors. Everyone was proud, as the good fortune

concerned not just Bi Feiyu, but all of them. Gifts were given, there was eating and drinking, and a distant uncle played his yangqin.

Edinburgh Scotland turned out to be a green place with grey stone houses and many towers. There was a lot of wind and rain, and Bi Feiyu developed a reddish eczema around the mouth and nose as a result of the dampness in the air. At first he had a difficult time distinguishing his faculty professors from one another, he even had difficulty telling the difference between professors and students. The university departments were spread across the city, and you had to buy your own lunch at cafés and takeaways that were equally spread out. But the food was rarely displayed. Bi Feiyu wasn't picky, there was actually nothing he wouldn't eat, but even this was almost impossible to get the waiter to understand. I will eat anything, he said in the best English he could muster, as he waved the menu vigorously, anything, actually. "I eat all!" But the waiter always insisted that he specify his preference, so he pointed at random on the menu, as if to demonstrate his fundamental openness to anything, only to be served something very deficient, such as a bottle of wine or slices of cheese and a packet of crackers. But Bi Feiyu did not make a fuss about such unfortunate encounters, as he was, we must remember, selected from among tens of thousands of others, many of them excellent in their fields, and he was indeed lucky to be there in the first place.

In the faculty, in addition to the professors, there were five other PhD students, three of them from Scotland, which he now understood Edinburgh was a part of, and therefore it was not called Edinburgh Scotland, but Edinburgh, Scotland, and the last was implied, and as such, redundant in daily speech. The other two students came from the turquoise continent, but all of them were fluent in the same English language, of which Bi Feiyu knew only about 500 words. Which was a step

forward. He had received an electronic dictionary as a farewell gift from one of his old professors, a pocket-sized electronic thing that looked a little like an old-fashioned calculator, the difference being that it could convert Chinese to English. When he arrived in Edinburgh, he knew 50 of these words, Hello, Goodbye, Day, Night, Black, White, Cat, Dog, Rain, Sun, Snow, Moon, etc., but after the first semester, he had managed to increase his vocabulary tenfold, it now also included several prepositions and verbs. Nevertheless, the others in his faculty for the most part preferred to race through much vaster fields of conversation than he, even with his electronic dictionary, could keep up with. In the beginning, they were all amused by this doohickey and ‘talked’ to each other about the weather, writing back and forth in English and Chinese. Both he and the English-speakers had sampled the unfamiliar sounds of the other’s language in their mouths, and it had generated much laughter as they urged Bi Feiyu to say *it's a braw, bricht moon licht nicht the nicht, och aye!* But when the Scots tried to wrap their tongues around 吃葡萄不吐葡萄皮, 不吃葡萄倒吐葡萄皮 – when you eat grapes, don’t spit the peel out, but when you don’t eat grapes, then spit the peel out – their mouths betrayed them with a spitting noise, leading Bi Feiyu to laugh heartily with his prominent teeth. In time, the slowness of the whole process grew tedious, as there were limits to how long one could keep a conversation going when every word must be processed by a gadget. And so it began that conversations would dissolve as soon as he showed up with his little black box, and he learned to keep it in his pocket, to stand and listen quietly and try to follow as best he could. It was a bit like being in a train speeding through a foreign landscape from which one could recognize something here or there, a tree, a sign that flashed past the window at great speed, and when in passing he thought he spotted something familiar, he never failed to nod

eagerly and say 'yes, yes', as if to demonstrate his participation. But the opportunity to listen in gradually became rarer, as the groups began to disintegrate even before he could join them.

In the western part of the city was a large park where Bi Feiyu went for walks. In the park, Scotland, which had seemed impenetrable so far, unfolded before him like a fan. All kinds of people walked around carefree, and he liked to look at their faces, different faces, as he had learned to distinguish one from another in more detail. Noses were big in greatly varied ways, the span of skin tones was more nuanced, from bluish to beige to pink, and the Western hair was an inexhaustible object of fascination. Fathers and mothers strolled around with little children, there were lovers and friends and girlfriends, and all of them walked and talked and joked and discussed with utmost ease in their strange language, that to him felt like whistling with a mouth full of sticky rice.

The park had in it a lake, and on the slope that led to the lake, there were swans. The majestic white birds sailed calmly on the water, like remote-controlled ships. Occasionally their wings curled up around them like a set of parentheses, and it occurred to Bi Feiyu that the birds were made of paper.

Winter arrived, and everything was covered in snow. There was something they called Christmas, a festival of some sort, and there was the prospect of many special activities to mark the occasion. There was talk about a game they would play at the Christmas party. Teams would be created. They decided it would be fun if the professors and students played against each other. The numbers more or less fit if the rest of the department was distributed evenly between the teams. They decided that Bi Feiyu, whose bowleggedness was really rather pronounced and not at all suitable for this type of sport, would be allotted the whistle. The rules were explained over and over and the electronic dictionary came into use, as he really wanted to understand, but the others let him know it didn't matter

much. The need for a whistle was rare and besides, the players knew the rules. The most important thing was that he played on both teams or neither, depending on how one saw it, and that in a sense he was the god of the game. It dawned on Bi Feiyu that he *did* know the game – it was soccer! – and he blew the whistle a couple of times during the game to show that he understood. They were running around on the grass, after all, soaked with sweat and yelling and shouting, while he just stood there with his whistle and watched. The first time the sound was not very loud, and he wasn't sure they heard it. The second time the game stopped altogether and there was a brief commotion with everyone talking over each other before the game resumed. Afterward spirits were high, everybody slapped each other on the shoulders, hair was dripping with sweat and snow, and there was laughter all around.

Dr. Richey, one of the older professors, threw a party for the entire faculty. He was on something the others referred to as 'his second marriage', and lived in a large house made up of several floors connected by a grand staircase. There were many people Bi Feiyu didn't know, and people from other departments of the university. A warm punch was served, and Bi Feiyu participated in several interesting conversations with some philosophy students and also talked to the au pair girl of the house, who showed up with one splendid dish after another for the open buffet. They talked about the food and the music, they talked about China and England. It was a wonderful evening. The party thinned out around eleven. The au pair girl carried away the empty plates, leaving half-empty wine-glasses on shelves and bureaus. Bi Feiyu was among the last to go. Dr. Richey and his young wife followed him out, and when he turned around in the driveway, they were still standing on the stairs and the wife called out, "Come back soon."

Only at night, just before he fell asleep, did Bi Feiyu allow himself to miss his family. He felt that if he delved too much

into that, he could not at the same time be suitably grateful for his good fortune, as if there was a connection between the two things, missing home and gratitude, and it was important to reside somewhere between the two. It was like a well: if he descended into it, he was not sure he could ever crawl back up again. He had been selected from among tens of thousands. He had considerable mathematical skills. He was the pride of his family and his old teachers. Once a week he wrote letters home, in which he reported in detail the things he saw in Edinburgh, the soccer match, the whistle, and the party at Dr Richey's.

Edinburgh closed down for winter break, the students disappeared with large bags, and Bi Feiyu was alone in the dorm. The shop windows were dark, the park white. The lake was frozen, its swans gliding bewildered around the ice, like old men with amnesia looking for something they'd forgotten. Edinburgh seemed different at Christmas; without people it became a medieval ghost town, abandoned by its princesses, knights and dragons, and the only person left to protect it was an odd-looking, bowlegged, Chinese castle-keeper.

While the people were away, Bi Feiyu had gotten a spectacular idea. Regular life resumed, the notice board marked by messages about rooms for rent and old books for sale, the faces in the hallway clean slates with no trace of the just-concluded holiday. Bi Feiyu knew exactly what to do: He would throw a party just like the one at Dr. Richey's. He would invite everyone from the faculty, the philosophy students, the au pair girl, and in general everyone he had met since he had come to Edinburgh. It would be a grand party where everyone talked to everyone, music played, and talk and laughter lasted late into the night.

Killing a swan proved to be much harder than he had thought. First there was the whole matter of catching it. A swan was a large animal, known for its violent aggression when

provoked, and so he had to plan the sequence of events with mathematical precision. The easiest option would have been to shoot the animal with an air rifle and just put a bullet in its head. He was certain that if he approached the swan from the front it would spring to attack, and it did not seem possible to kill it with his bare hands in a direct confrontation. A duck perhaps, or a small bird, but not a swan – the animal was simply too big, too unpredictable. In the absence of a better plan, he bought a fish net in a hunting supply store and sketched out the imminent course of action.

There was a specific place between some trees where the swans usually came up from the lake, and he selected this as his hunting site. He assigned letters to each tree, A, B, C and D, and connected them with lines that symbolized the invisible fishing line, the demarcation of the battlefield. At some point one of the swans would surely emerge from the lake, and he would simply step out from behind the tree, sneak up on the bird, and cast the fish net over it. Then he would kill it with a dagger.

It did not go as he planned. The swan must have sensed his ill intentions, because it turned toward him and began to hiss viciously while Bi Feiyu stood still, waving the net. Wings spread and neck outstretched, the bird shot directly towards him; panic-stricken he threw the net, turned, and ran towards the lake. There was a thud, all the air left him, earth, snow and leaves lay in front of his nose, his foot was entangled in the net: he must have fallen. Then the swan attacked, both were entangled in the net, the animal's bill was far stronger than he expected, and Bi Feiyu fought chaotically, flailing his arms in an indistinguishable tangle of blood, feathers and net. Finally he managed to grasp the swan's neck with both hands and squeezed it tight, and squeezed and squeezed, until it finally became quiet. He had lost a nail, his hands and arms were

bloody and lacerated from swan bites, it had been a messy affair, but the operation succeeded, and the swan was dead.

Bi Feiyu carried the animal home in a large backpack. The butchery proved no less messy, but at least the bird was dead while he did it. The worst part was removing all the feathers. He had seen his mother do this with more modestly proportioned poultry, but de-feathering the swan seemed endless. Especially the coarser feathers on the back, which refused to leave the flesh, or maybe it was vice versa, red chunks hung at the end every time he pulled a feather out. Nevertheless, he ended up with 30 pounds of meat. The swan was now neatly carved and stacked, ready to be cooked and eaten.

The invitation was printed in bright colors just before the Chinese New Year. The electronic dictionary had been in use. “Celebrate China New Year”, it said. “All people welcome. China beer and original food buffet”. He put it in each faculty mailbox, and hung it on the bulletin boards around the university. Most of the people he spoke to promised they would come. Could they possibly bring a friend along? Bi Feiyu nodded animatedly. Yes, yes, he said. Spread word. Anybody come. Anybody!

It took him three days to cook the food. Of the neck, he made a clear swan soup, to which the guests could add paper-thin slices of swan meat, together with noodles, vegetables and spices. He prepared the other parts of the swan in the oven, browned with honey and pine nuts, and also as a stew with special Yilang spices. He fried pieces of swan with lemongrass and mushrooms. He steamed other pieces for many hours in a bamboo-steamer, the fine breast cut into perfect cubes in the company of tasty herbs and bok choy. He made *bulou fan*, the famed pineapple-rice of his region, as well as garlic sauce, lemon sauce and black sauce. He braised asparagus in swan *jus*. He stuffed swan meat and deep-fried it with a hot chili sauce.

The entrails were prepared separately, kidneys with oyster sauce, ginger and spring onions, and liver with a sweet bean sauce his grandmother used to make. All in all, it was really very nice.

The evening came, everything was ready. The fridge was filled with ice-cold Tsingtao, the kitchen table full of colorful dishes, and the dorm hallway soon filled with both well known and new faces. Dr. Richey came with his young wife, the au pair girl came, and the students from the philosophy department showed up with a bunch of girls from psychology. The other dorm residents had kindly left their rooms open, and the guests relaxed on office chairs, stools, inverted waste baskets and the edges of beds, everyone eating and drinking. At some point someone started playing a guitar and everyone gathered in the doorway to listen. The others seemed to know the music, they all sang along, “Nirvana”, shouted one of the girls from psychology, at which point the electronic dictionary emerged.

The party moved on to its next phase, and people were hungry again. They had eaten well earlier but there was plenty of food left, which they began to warm in the college microwave. They ate with great appetite and gusto. “What's in it?”, asked the girl from psychology. Someone shouted, “dog”, which elicited laughter and boos. “Chop suey”, said Bi Feiyu. “I mean the meat”, said the girl. “Is it veal?” Bi Feiyu consulted the electronic dictionary. “Swan?”, he asked, unsure about the correct pronunciation. First there was much laughter, swan, that's a good one, but then, suddenly, the room fell silent. Forks and chopsticks froze in the air, jaws suspended, half-chewed mouthfuls held in arrest. Everyone looked at Bi Feiyu. “Swan?” He nodded energetically: swan. He mentioned the name of the park, where he had caught it, he waved his arms wildly in the air and showed them the missing fingernail.

Only the queen of England had the authority to kill swans, said *The Scotsman*. Bi Feiyu's student ID picture took up most of the front page and there was a long article, in which a number of words were unknown (offense, perpetrator, ferocious, disgrace, expel). He had cut out the article and put it among his things. He had been summoned to the vice-chancellor's office, escorted by two Scottish policemen in iron hats.

The vice-chancellor apologized to Bi Feiyu for the presence of the two officers, the drama of it all, he did understand that several professors had taken part in the meal, he said, but Bi Feiyu had committed a serious crime, a crime that called for serious consequences. He talked about precautions. The faculty board and university authorities had considered several options, of which expulsion from the university was the mildest, and extradition from the country the harshest.

They were well aware that it had not been done with ill intentions. It was a public park, and he came from a different culture, but a swan? It was barbaric, simply barbaric, and it could not go unpunished. The words 'regret' and 'serious' came up. There would be other universities, said the vice-chancellor. With his skills in mathematics there would be other universities. However, they could not give him their recommendation; they would have to specify what had happened in his papers.

Bi Feiyu packed his things, but no one came to say goodbye. He walked through the city's grey streets with his bags, past mothers with strollers, tourists in kilts, past Dr. Richey's house, past the park, where he lowered his gaze, and in this way he left that faraway, faraway place, Edinburgh Scotland.

From *Grumme historier*, 2011. (Grim Stories).

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~~FROM THE TRANSI-CAN OF POETRY~~

Dr. Martens was a tall, thin man – unmarried of course; he most preferred women who were exactly like men, and then, why get married to them? His shoes were of the color shoes ought to be, namely brown, his shirts always a light blue, his pants beige, and so everything was in absolutely perfect order when he took his walks with feet that were turned out a tiny bit, his hands behind his back and his torso snapping slightly forward with every step he took. In one of his pockets he always carried a pocket-watch, meticulously fastened to a hook in his trousers by a silver chain; in his other pocket he had a freshly washed, newly ironed handkerchief just in case -- despite his innate skepticism – he actually were to chance upon a real lady to whom he might be inclined to offer his handkerchief as a sitting surface on some filthy bench or the like. In the other pocket he had one more so that he could most discreetly – never with a blaring or a honking sound, but always with a soft snort – liberate himself from undesired secretions.

Dr. Martens' civil occupation was editorial philologist. And not only that. He was a head editorial philologist, but we won't even stop at that because in fact it happened that Dr. Martens functioned as head editorial philologist to another head editorial philologist, who for his part supervised six whole editorial philologists. So if we're going to be completely accurate – and precision after all is a hallmark of the scientific discipline represented by Dr. Martens – the title that Dr. Martens had would be nothing less than head head editorial philologist. In this context the word *head*

unjustly assumes a slightly comical touch since an editorial philologist primarily occupies himself with things that lie at the *bottom* of and *to the rear* of something rather than things that *head up* something, and for that reason Dr. Martens had proudly had a fine little etching of two crossed shovels printed at the top of his stationery to the left of his name and title.

Whenever Dr. Martens took part in family get-togethers and other forms of social events outside of the narrow professional circles he normally frequented, things around him usually grew very quiet when he introduced himself as an editorial philologist. (Dr. Martens was too modest to identify himself by the more correct “head head editorial philologist,” and in making this exception allowed himself in so doing to deviate from his principle of striving for precision with every fiber of his being.) Even veteran specialists in literature didn’t know about the important portion of excavation work that lay behind the publication of literary works that they took for granted every day, not to mention the common man for whom a book was just a book. Nothing could be more erroneous. The publication of the great classic works was due solely to people like Dr. Martens who knew how to distinguish between a sketch, a rough draft, a clean copy, a proof, a first printing, and then later on the subsequent editions of a given work, and for this reason that the work could be said to be identical to itself only in the tunnel vision of the most simple-minded person. Dr. Martens’ occupation became no less dizzying when you considered the fact that a rough draft could exist in countless variants, as could a clean copy as well, and a proof, a first printing, etc. And even within a given variant of a rough draft even more new universes could unfold in the form of a locally effected correction here and a change there – but Dr.

Martens rarely got that far down into the dizzying abyss of his profession at family get-togethers.

“Many people think that a book is just a book,” Dr. Martens said to his students when he started teaching at the university at the beginning of a new semester. Then he showed them a so-called book-block, a bare book – a book stripped of its binding, title page, and typography. It was a book that most people would insist was not a book because it consisted of nothing but blank pages. He then asked his students to tell him what kind of book this very book-block had been. This was a conundrum, but for people who love books it was not insoluble. Starry eyes soon lit up in the dark sky of the auditorium when it dawned on the students that a book obviously wasn’t just a book, but that they, merely by examining its format, could determine that the book in question was a book of fiction, that on the basis of its thickness they understood that it was a novel, and that by rubbing the parchment-thin paper between their fingers they knew that the novel belonged to the less serious genre. Finally, with a surprising firmness in their voices, they decided that the book-block was an American novel from 1936 and that it belonged to the newsstand and pulp-fiction category.

Over the years Dr. Martens developed and refined his point of view. Thus it was by a what one calls slip of the tongue that one semester he happened to ask his students to tell him what book the book-block he had brought with him *would be*, and not, as was his practice, what it *had been*; as if the book’s ultimate contents and characters were a function of the variables of the book-block and not the other way around. The students threw themselves into the assignment with the same enthusiasm as previous classes had done and came to the conclusion that this very book would be the third novel by a practically

unknown author by the name of Norman Kraft, that it would go by the unassuming title of *The Silent Singer*, that it would appear in an edition of one thousand, and that – after a mixed reception – forty-two copies would be sold (of which eighteen would be bought by the author’s immediate family), and that the remainder of the edition’s nine hundred and fifty-eight copies, after lying fallow for only two seasons, would be sent to be shredded.

It was all in all a seemingly harmless exercise which occasioned a great deal of hilarity among the students, and if Dr. Martens went along with the joke with quiet seriousness and without correcting his pupils, it wasn’t because he had relaxed his precision, but solely because his picture of the world had been exposed to a Copernican revolution in the flick of a finger, and that all of a sudden it seemed obvious to him that the book block was going to become the above-mentioned novel by this Kraft individual.

So it didn’t take him by surprise either when the novel was published. Even not withstanding the fact that there had been certain inaccuracies in his students’ analysis of the book block’s semiotic inherencies (by way of example, in the end there were forty-three copies in circulation and not the forty-two that had been predicted, for the simple reason that one book had fallen off the bed of the truck during delivery, and that the little girl who found it and picked it up ended up taking it home and putting it on the top of the pile that she used for standing on to reach the sink).

So it was because of one of those kinds of coincidences that, when you encounter them in literature, seem so improbable that you write them off as poetic creativity and not as a truthful depiction of reality that Dr. Martens founded a completely new scientific discipline. Book prognosis operated

contrary to book history from which it had originated; it presaged and heralded which books would be written by whom and when. Naturally an exposure of the precise contents of the book, point by point, was a part of this.

So much for Dr. Martens' great book-semiotic discovery.

On a daily basis Dr. Martens was chiefly concerned with the errors, corrections, alterations, additions, and omissions that a given book was the result of. He was fond of declaring that the most interesting thing about a book was what it was not. Dr. Martens was an almost monomaniacal collector of everything that landed in various creative writers' garbage cans because, he believed, it was here the true literary work lay hidden. Thus in the garbage can of the Norman Kraft who sold forty-two copies of a mediocre book an immortal masterpiece was found. If he had simply arranged things differently and let some of the sentences, words, and syllables that landed in the garbage can end up in his book and vice-versa *The Silent Singer* (whose first title – the waste basket's depths revealed – had been *The ~~Mute~~ Silent Singer*) would not only have been made into a Hollywood film with Gregory Peck in the leading role, in time it might possibly also (if in the future he also understood how to sort his creative garbage) have summoned Norman Kraft to Stockholm in white tie and tails. We can only speculate about this.

For this reason Dr. Martens was a radical editor of the works of a number of creative writers (Goethe, Schiller, etc.) from which the actual poems were omitted and where only the variants – the corrections, mistakes, alterations, additions, and omissions – were included. In those editions of his, the poems were nonetheless included, as he wrote, “as a necessary concession to the reader,” a kind of by-product of the mistakes,

corrections, alterations, etc., and which we readers for habitual (but completely superfluous) reasons feel ourselves attracted to. Reprintings of Dr. Martens' prior editions wished to be consistent with this thinking by completely omitting the finished works, but that gave rise to a few speculations that the poems that had previously been included solely for conventional considerations, themselves now became a part of the weeding process and thereby joined the substantial number of omissions, mistakes, corrections, etc. The problem was not solved until the later Dr. Martens completely abandoned granting the poetic work any space in his editions.

It wasn't until he sat down to edit the variants of Norman Kraft's antecedent narrative cycle, *Eccentric Existences*, that the full consequences of his thinking dawned on him. By means of the edition a splendid variant apparatus of the otherwise mediocre Kraft, he wanted to drive home his radical point that creative writings – the work's final form – ought to be discarded and the true work rescued out of the garbage cans of people like Dr. Martens. It needs to be understood here that it was editorial philologists of his kind who were the real creative writers while authors like Kraft were to be understood more as grass for a cow's milk which is also why it is reasonable that the creative writer will hereafter be enclosed in parentheses.

Thus he found in (Norman Kraft's) waste-paper basket the initial rudiments of a story about a manufacturer of electric blankets, a story that ended up being decisive for the unexpected direction that Dr. Martens' own life came to take.

Something needs to be said about how Dr. Martens acquired these discarded tidbits since in the nature of the case it was of decisive significance that (the poet) himself was ignorant about everything that was happening around the origin of the literary work. Since it was exclusively the work's negative

impression on world literature – the non-work – that was of interest, it wouldn't be unthinkable that certain refractory (poet) types would intentionally get the idea to bring about a substitution of work for non-work so that it was the intended (poet's) work that was tossed in the garbage can instead of the actual variants. This was considered by Dr. Martens as a not unessential part of the philologist's task, to bring to light and acquire these weeded out items too.

And now when we know that (poets') works come into existence in a beautiful transport of brilliant ecstasy, it isn't difficult to imagine how Dr. Martens had to collect his material on everything all the way from torn-off remnants of wallpaper to random scribblings on napkins, bus tickets, and door frames, and whatever else (Kraft) made use of. Disguised as an antenna installer, janitor, gas-meter reader, and a cookie salesgirl, Dr. Martens wheedled his access to (Kraft's) garret as *Eccentric Existences* was coming into being and thus got his hands on the poetic trash just as, in a less poetic way, he would, like reporters from the tabloids, also lie in wait down in the back courtyard of the (creative writer's) apartment building where he snapped up the rest when the garbage was brought down.

His evenings were spent analyzing and determining the character of what had been thrown away. What colors of ink was the text written in, and were parts written in pencil? The deletions held an especially great interest of course; and the more deletions a given word had, the greater its significance. Were there additions, and were they above or below the line? -- it was all essential in order to decide when a given part of the text had come into being in the poetic process, and to determine its possibilities of belonging to the non-work.

The disquieting element in the poetic work that Dr. Martens found, however, were precisely those corrections that

the story of the maker of electric blankets had undergone in transit. Initially the manufacturer, he read, was pudgy and had a lot of body hair and a wife by the name of Gertrud. The manufacturer of electric blankets was something of a man about town and loved a good Cuban cigar on top of a substantial dinner. In addition, as Dr. Martens constructed his way to it on the basis of the poetic trash, he liked to pat his wife on her ample derriere and call her a nice old scow when she served him his morning coffee in their nicely furnished dining room. The electric-blanket manufacturer, Gunter M., had been passionately fond of the German Romantics in his early youth and had been especially engrossed by Goethe's theory of colors, but that was all a very long time ago now.

It was a story that at its very beginning was devoid of opposition and internal dynamics, and Dr. Martens had a very hard time seeing what direction it was going to continue in. He waited anxiously beside (Kraft's) trash basket.

He soon discovered that the electric-blanket manufacturer no longer was an ~~electric-blanket manufacturer~~ and a ~~man about town~~ but instead had gotten hung up on his interests from his romantic youth. Dr. Martens was able to read how the earlier Gunter M. had had a sporadic youthful affair – inspired by *Faust* – with a girl by the name of Gretchen. It hadn't amounted to anything more, and the story didn't say anything about what had happened to this Gretchen afterwards.

On the other hand we did hear how the somewhat older ~~Gunter M.~~ (who had now yielded in favor of a somewhat thinner and taller Dr. M.) would never think of leaving the house without an umbrella. His umbrellas were purchased in specialty stores in London and Germany, and – in addition to protecting Dr. M. from possible rain showers – they signaled his care, caution, and possibly also sense of quality, all

characteristics that we had not encountered in his variant ~~Gunter M.~~

But now ~~Dr. M.~~ unfurled his mysterious initial letter further and became Dr. Martens. This Dr. Martens, it said on a corner of a milk carton, “always read a little bit of the synoptic variant apparatus to Kloppstock’s *Messias* before he went to bed.” And on a receipt from a dairy store it was revealed how “he would shiver with delight, and literally get dizzy, whenever he thought of the monstrous work which was embedded in every single symbol of this four-volume opus – what power, what triumph of the spirit!” to cite (Kraft) at this point.

When Dr. Martens read this particular scrap of paper, he was standing in the back courtyard of (Kraft’s) building wearing a slightly sinister-looking trench-coat appropriate to the occasion and could easily have been mistaken for a bum. Fate decreed that at this very moment (Kraft) himself should appear. Normally Dr. Martens took care to disappear when the back door opened and Kraft might risk coming out. But not this time; he was confused. This was the first time (the creative writer) and the philologist met. (Kraft) strode diagonally across the courtyard toward Dr. Martens, took the scrap of paper out of his hand with an absent-minded look that we know so well in writers, and went back again with firm steps and a casual: “I’ll need that. It’s going to be included.”

If Dr. Martens had shivered and gotten dizzy about the text that he had just surrendered to (Kraft), it was nothing compared to the shivering and dizziness he was in in reality.

He groped and rooted around in the garbage can as if to grab hold of something concrete and came upon a new scrap of paper. On it was written: “If Dr. Martens had shivered and gotten dizzy about the text that he had just surrendered to (Kraft), it was nothing compared to the shivering and dizziness

he was in now. He had to know how his story ended. Dr. Martens, who was dressed a little like a bum, and who for that reason wasn't of any concern to anybody, started rooting around in the trash again. Here he found a scrap of paper, a note that (Kraft) had written to himself: *The other existence – the one that ended up in the garbage can – was, according to Dr. Martens' own point of view the real one. His own existence had now been elevated to a poetic work and no longer mattered.*”

Dr. Martens, who actually looked more and more like a bum, read the slip of paper four times. Thereupon he threw it back into the garbage can but first took care to tear it carefully into tiny pieces.

It has since been reported that he married the widow of the local dairy-store owner, a fat, jovial woman by the name of Gertrud. Dr. Martens, who imperceptibly gained weight himself and diminished in height, couldn't be recognized by anyone, not even (Kraft) who sometimes bought groceries on credit in the dairy store. What none of the parties involved knew was the fact that Gertrud's late husband had sold electric blankets for a brief time in his youth.

From *Grumme historier*, 2011. (Grim Stories).

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“From the Trash Can of Poetry” featured in *Literary Review*, spring 2008

AEEEEIII EEEIAAAA

Her name is Mia, and she is wearing her red dress. It is salsa night at the strip mall. Normally she is sweet and ordinary. Her mother, Mrs. Nussbaum, likes it when her daughter talks about her friends, but Mia never has much to tell. She wears a hair clip on each side of her head, she makes a living of caring for others, but secretly she reads poetry on the bus and today she is only wearing one hair clip. On the other side, her hair falls softly against her cheek, and it feels like celestial beings are breathing on her face when she moves.

The heels are high and the cleavage deep. In the restaurant the light is more subdued than usual; it is quite dark and Mia can see nothing as she sweeps through the door. She is an autumn leaf, falling silently from a tree. You don't ordinarily see them, but her legs are exceptionally beautiful, and suddenly they know it themselves by the way she is walking. They want to dance and they don't care with whom. They're going to dance no matter what. Salsa is throbbing from the sound system, the floor is vibrating, pumping it through the high heels and the carefully talcum-powdered shoes, up along Mia's taut calves, knees that give way to the music, and further up through her thighs that disappear under the dress (and who knows what else may happen up there). All we know is this: that Mia says yes with her red lips when a shadow emerges from the dark and asks the lady for a dance.

He is as good as dead, if he is not dead already. Okay, let's be frank - he *is* dead. He is somewhere in transit between this life and the next. A genuine *esperpento valleinclaniano*,

though he doesn't know it himself. He has left this world, but fears taking that definitive step into death.

Mia smiles to him with her red lips. She turns her face in this and that direction. Her hair has become feathers. Trustfully she places her hand with the little, red-enameled fingernails on his shoulder, and her body – warm and red in the nighttime – she entrusts to him as well. And the salsa is pumping, Mia's body feels it so clearly as it breeds in her limbs, or else it is her heart.

The esperpento swings her around, and with him swings his one eye. It dangles at the end of its socket like a confused pendulum, a bloodshot sphere with no other connection to him than the thread-like vein it is attached to. His body is falling apart, and from his mouth steams a cold, musty vapor. Is it because he is gasping for breath – or is he laughing? With him, it is hard to tell what is what, only that his crunchy, gray hand grabs Mia's buttocks, and that Mia and her red lips are merely smiling to him, or else to the thin air.

Normally she dresses in a cap and thick, woolen sweaters, but today we know her legs are truly extremely beautiful, practically spectacular in the sheer stockings. The legs know it, too, now – and with assurance. You tell from the way she is dancing, turning, and letting herself be turned round and round, forgetting herself totally, which is why she doesn't notice when a portion of the esperpento's face breaks loose as a result of the centrifugal force. It is the right side, the good side, the one with the eye still in its socket, and it flies off into one of the room's many dark corners. The left side of the esperpento's face, the side with the dangling eyeball (until now the bad side, but just now, with the loss of the other side of his face, promoted to the good side), is all there is left to represent his face.

Mia seems unaware, or else she doesn't care, her blood pulsing with life as she leans her soft, white cheek against the esperpento's one remaining. Because they're in the midst of wild, throbbing dancing, because they are twirling round and round on the dance floor, each in his or her respective body, it is no simple maneuver for their cheeks to meet, and as her white, soft one attempts to reach his worm-eaten one, it bumps into his nose. Perhaps she doesn't see it break off like a dry branch, perhaps she doesn't notice how the dry noseflakes sprinkles down over her red bosom like fish feed, for at this very instant she sends the esperpento a milky look, overflowing with the purest lust. It is not the transparent, girlish lust that comes from reading poetry, nor the kind that descends from the heavens and cover young girls like fine angel dust, no, this is an altogether different kind of lust, thick-flowing and dangerous. It is a desire that emerges from the earth like a cool, dark mist. Thus aroused, the esperpento grabs her buttocks still tighter with his crumbling, bone fingers, kneads them, makes them redder and warmer, and Mia is again floating on a cloud held aloft by tooting trumpets and other salsa instruments of burnished brass.

As they swing each other around the floor, Mia's remaining hair clip whirls off and lands somewhere in the darkness, possibly next to the esperpento's despairing chunk of face. Now her hair is completely loosened and Mia dances and her hair dances with her about her head like a shiny, black halo, and she is really looking both dangerous and beautiful this evening. She seems so different. Those who know her say she does some kind of social work, but up until now, no one has seen her legs, nor her back, for that matter, which is naked and glossy in the tight red dress. Mia sweats a glossy sweat.

She starts rotating around her own axis, lifting her dress up with the one hand to give a proper view of her thighs and stretching the other heavenward as she lets herself be led by the esperpento's dead, black mummy hand. Her body turns endlessly around itself, but the white, angel face seems fixated on the esperpento. Now it is his turn, and Mia holds the esperpento's hand as he transforms himself into a spinning top of dawdelling flesh strips. He looks like a Christmas tree decorated with human offal, but Mia isn't squeamish, she holds his blackened hand so sweetly.

The esperpento seems to reach a point of total exhaustion. He is, after all, more than old; he is dead. He stands there with both feet planted in the grave and his legs look kind of beat, about to buckle under him, so he makes for a corner to take a breather, one hand on his heart, the other waving apologetically to buy time. He leans up against a wall, simply clatters right into it, a pitiful sight, this man, noseless and half faceless as he is. All apart from the dangling eye, naturally, that's swinging around particularly scoutingly in its attempt to find where it was, now, he'd put those cigarettes, and then the tongue – a dry, black item, reminiscent of a parrot's – that we are treated to the sight of for the first time as it sticks out of the skull, gasping for air.

He finds them in the shirt pocket, the cigarettes, American Spirit. The pocket they were lying in is moldy and moldering and, as he fishes out the smokes, its side stitches give up and it flaps limply down on his chest. The dry parrot tongue quivers into the air to catch the cigarette and haul it into the cranium mouth. It's a wretched sight because the lips are only attached on the left side of the face and they hang loose and bone dry along his jaw like two deserted pubes. With his right hand he pulls a lighter out of his pants pocket, and soon the lit

end flares up in the dark. It is really the only thing visible, the ember that seems to be breathing, its quiet pulsating, there in the darkness, almost as though there was life in him.

Out on the dance floor Mia shakes her bared shoulders rhythmically to the sound of a cowbell. Her eyes are half closed, looking inward. Her feet don't leave the floor, only her hips and shoulders are moving. She looks to be in some kind of holy ecstasy, the sight of which is both enthralling and ominous.

Now the feet are moving again. They begin stamping hard, in time with the cowbell, and the salsa singer's voice suddenly takes on a deep, melancholy timbre. Mia opens her eyes wide and sees – she sees straight through the darkness at the esperpento.

She tramps in time towards him without taking her eyes off him. Her head is lowered like a bull's when it joins battle with the bullfighter's red cape, eyes glowering behind lowered eyelids.

You think you can get out of it? says Mia. I thought you wanted to dance.

The esperpento grins with his skullface, panting. A break, he pleads. Just a little break.

Mia takes the cigarette out of his cold hand without letting go of his gaze. She leans back her head, sticks the smoke in between the slightly parted red lips and sucks until the ember lights up and transforms the entire white cigarette stick into ash. She exhales the smoke into his face, a long, thin smokeworm that crawls in through the hollow of the cranium eye. Consider the break over, she says. With her thumb and index finger, she flicks the cigarette away. She turns her back and hauls him to the dance floor behind her swinging hips, doesn't even notice that his hair has caught on fire.

It is not as if that the esperpento's hair was all that impressive to begin with. Most of all it resembled the scorched, stiff stalks that poke up out of the bog after a particularly hard summer. But now it is turned into a flaming coiffure about the head of the esperpento, in yellow, orange red and blue. The smell of burnt flesh begins to spread. The eyeball has been toasted to a raisin and the esperpento is now navigating purely by instinct. The left side of the face glides off the skull slowly, like a singed piece of meat off a teflon pan. It smacks down on Mia's red shoes that, without Mia's knowledge, kick it away in their dancing ecstasy, sending it into the corner of the room. Mia is dancing through time, she is dancing for hundreds of years, but you cannot tell by looking at her. She doesn't grow older, merely redder and warmer.

The esperpento is growing warmer as well. The heat from the flames, from the dance itself, and maybe a little bit from his lecherousness, cause the rest of the flesh to melt from the esperpento's already much too gaunt body, like fat off a Christmas goose. No more than a bunch of rattling bones is to be seen under his shirt, but his energy appears renewed, he dances like a madman, or is it the pain caused by the blaze that makes him writhe round and round on the floor in spasms?

Then the salsa music on the hot dance floor is drowned out by Mia's scream.

"Aeeiii eeeiaaa," she screams. It doesn't sound like Mia is screaming the scream, but that the scream is screaming her. Me scares even herself, she is just a young girl who likes to dance. It is a sound that momentarily makes everything stand still. It is a sound outside time.

And then they carry on. The esperpento dances and dances until his charred *asado* of a body explodes in a murky cloud of dust, just as the staff is coming over to say it's time to

go home. They point impatiently at their watches. The music has stopped.

The busses do not run this time of night. Nor is there anyone to offer her a lift, but it doesn't matter. Mia prefers to walk. She walks across the fields, and with each step she takes her heels sink deep down into the moist, night-chilled earth. You can see her drawing her breath along after her in a foggy trail as her figure gradually recedes in the moonlight. The trail of fog remains hanging in the air and it seems to us that Mia disappears before our eyes, that she dissolves in the night into nothingness.

From *Grumme historier*, 2011. (Grim Stories).

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THANK YOU FOR THE RIVER

Purnamarca, October 5, 2006

Dear Uncle Eugenio,

Thank you for the river. What a surprise I had unwrapping it. Nobody here (neither me nor any of the guests) had expected such a big gift from you. You usually send smaller things and I am always very pleased with them. The sheath knife you sent me when I turned 9 and the sling shot when I turned 8 – I am still really happy about them. But a river! I hadn't even imagined wanting such a thing.

The package arrived safely and hadn't – as you worried in your letter – leaked in transit. It was all still there, the brownish water, pebbles, tadpoles, river fish, mud. It didn't seem like anything broke during shipment but this, of course, is hard to say with rivers. The water was kind of brown, when I think about it. You can imagine my Mother's reaction when I opened it! I am sure that you are laughing right now. None of the ladies she had invited were properly dressed (they kept saying). You should have seen Aunt Augusta's face! Her mouth! It looked like a hen's bottom trying to kiss the egg it just laid!) They all sat – not just Aunt Augusta, but also Beatrice, Mercedes, Rocio, María, Anna, and cousin Cornelia (who has become oh so grown up and stopped playing with boys). They all sat in their fine shoes and their frilled skirts, with their little what's it's name brocade and pearl handbags in their laps, when

the brown water started to gush out of the package like an open fire hydrant.

When they realized what was in the package, they jumped up on chairs and tables and stumbled around in birthday cake and candles, knocking over the precious little crystal glasses that Mother loves so much, port spilled over the lace tablecloth (that had been cleaned and starched at a real dry cleaner's and draped over the long mahogany table, extended especially for the occasion). But soon the cake and the tablecloth and the ladies' fine shoes didn't matter, because the whole living room was under water. Poor Father didn't know what to do with his hands. Mother ordered him about from her position on top of the display cabinet. About this time Aunt Augusta tried to grab the chandelier to pull herself up, but she couldn't reach it; she must have swallowed at least a liter of flood water in her attempt. And Father tried to shovel the water out through the window, first with his hands and then the antique soup terrine that is normally locked in the glass cabinet. But it was far too much and it kept on gushing. Father looked so pale, balancing on the back of the winged armchair, mother with a hairdo of seaweed, and cousin Cornelia, howling, suddenly wasn't so grown up anymore. Your gift turned everything upside down. It wasn't long before the ladies left, some of them without even saying goodbye.

Mother, prissy as she sometimes can be, said I could only play with the river outside. I pestered her if I could keep it in my room if I promised to keep the door tightly shut; but she didn't budge. She didn't even answer. She just gave me a really stern look (she doesn't know I am writing this letter to you – nobody has mentioned your name since I unwrapped your gift.) You know what this street looks like, with the small houses as close as teeth in a mouth, and how flat balls and rusty bikes are

lying in the street and stray dogs are running wild. You also know how the road goes uphill, and when I let the river out it ran downwards all the way to the foot of the town hall by Calle Rio Grande, which I guess makes sense. The whole city is a mess, especially since people in Calle Rio Grande weren't exactly prepared for a river (they keep saying). Here comes Mother. More later.

Your devoted Nephew,
Rafael

From *Grumme historier*, 2011. (Grim Stories).
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“Thank You For the River” featured in *Connotations*, fall 2007

THE WRITER

He had within him an as yet unseen collection of sentences. When he went walking in the park, he could feel them tingling under his skin; it was merely a question of time before they would stream out of him in improbable, ground-breaking combinations. There was no doubt about it. All the signs were there that he was nurturing the Great Danish Novel. A large work in three volumes with myriads of amusing notes, references, digressions and anecdotes.

But when he came home after his walks he sat down in front of his electric typewriter and stared rigidly at the white sheet of paper waiting for the work which had seemed so full of promise in the park. Waiting for the sentences which went dumb, as it were, whenever he tried to pin them down.

Occasionally he succeeded in capturing the odd sentence, such as: 'Only the moody moon was witness to the creation of his work'. He thought there was a cunning, tantalising *jeu de mots* inherent in the sentence with the clever rhyme of moody and moon, and the visual beauty of it was undeniable: as well, four full moons beaming at him from the middle of the sentence. He sat looking at 'Only the moody moon was witness to the creation of his work', searching for the myriad of words which could follow up such a jewel, but there was nothing to add, so he had to abandon the solitary sentence on the piece of paper inserted in the typewriter.

During his walks, however, he could sense the outline of a voluminous work, supple and sufficient, rich in wisdom and wit. As a town hall clerk he had diverting daily contact with the words which so shamelessly denied him

company later in the day. For example, one of his favourite activities was to write speeches for the mayor's public engagements. Not infrequently the mayor was invited to inaugurate a new roundabout or a bus stop, and on these occasions the mayor's speeches were created by the Writer's hand.

He had secretly anticipated and appropriated the title of 'the Writer', which he deemed rightfully his. It was not unreasonable, considering the promise of the sentences inside him.

He had also turned his hand to a party song in his time at the town hall: on the occasion of the mayor's 60th birthday. It was, of course, a minor venture compared to the work which lay smouldering within him, but it was by no means a second-rate song, and he couldn't help noticing that several town hall employees had folded it and put it in their breast pockets, probably to return to some of the highlights at a later date.

The Writer also wrote several magnificent Christmas cards to close and distant relatives. Every year he purchased approximately fifty cards picturing Christmas pixies at the Post Office with the intention of writing to pretty well anyone. Old school friends who were no more than a faded sepia blob on a school photograph and with whom he had lost contact ages ago were a good excuse to let out some of the words clamouring in his head. What an occasion it would be to receive such a wonderful card from a long forgotten fellow pupil! What a life-enriching experience! He thought lovingly of the scene which would be played out when the little Christmas epic landed on the hallway floor. What wouldn't his old school friends think of the Writer! They would realise that he had really come a long way in life. It would be obvious to them. The thought

overwhelmed him, and he felt inspired to commit a small ode to paper about the joyful Christmas period and the ebbing year. He liked that word: ebbing. It not only described the essence of the time of year, but also revealed his refined linguistic sense.

The Writer safely assumed that he could gradually begin to embrace his title and the satisfactions of his prospective greatness. It wouldn't be overstating his case at this particular moment, things were looking so rosy. Of course, one shouldn't make too much of it. Obviously, if someone in his situation cut too much of a dash, there would be a chance that he would arouse envy. That was by no means his intention. It wasn't that he thought the talent which had been bestowed upon him made him anything special. It was simply the way it was. It was a question of time before this talent materialised into what would undoubtedly be called *The Great Danish Novel*.

His colleagues quickly picked up on it. He was now referred to as the Writer. Signposting for blind exits? Give it to the Writer, they would say. Some greeted him when he was taking his afternoon constitutional in the park. There's the Writer, they would exclaim, and accompanied their greeting with a doffed hat. Everywhere, wherever he went, they were familiar with who he was and the erudition he embodied. All the words he had salted away. How remarkable humanity was! For all those years no-one had had an inkling of the treasures which lay hidden behind the neatly pressed waistcoat he always wore. Far and wide, they acknowledged his true identity, even at the hostelry he had begun to frequent when his park promenade didn't immediately yield the returns for which he had hoped. He could have a tipple on his way home to nurture and assuage the passage of sentences out of his system.

Truth to tell, it wasn't perhaps so much that they didn't want to come out as that they came out in a somewhat

chaotic sequence. One sentence here, one sentence there. It was simply impossible to say where they fitted into the novel. If only he knew what the whole thing was about. One moment a sentence might appear which seemed destined for the very beginning - whatever that was - and the next there might be a sentence which could conceivably find its appropriate context on page 323. Who could possibly know?

The Writer didn't. He could write all the sentences down, of course he could, but what a job it would be the day he had to sort through to put them in the right order. It simply wasn't feasible.

Naturally, he did try writing them down. A phrase had come to mind on one of his walks: 'the recumbent air beneath the tips of the lime trees'. When he got home he wrote it down and hung it on the wall with the confusion of phrases and sentences resulting from his afternoon exercise. It was a colossal task. However, the phrase looked really good on his wall until it occurred to him that another writer, J.P.Jacobsen, had probably had left his prints on it. It was taken down and he was left feeling dejected. How far could he rely on the other phrases and sentences? In fact, it was actually hard to determine whether they belonged to his forthcoming work or novels already in existence. The sentences had their own moods, much like the moon which witnessed the creation of his work.

The novel-to-be on the wall grew. As the years went by, the sentences spread like year rings in a tree. You could almost count every single afternoon walk he had taken since he had started writing down his thoughts. And, as unpromising as it seemed, you had a sense of the whole. The sentences stood on tiptoes around the first like a throng of people around a traffic accident: 'Only the moody moon was witness to the creation of his work.' It was as if they were competing to be *the* sentence to

follow up the first, but it was impossible to say which one was the true successor. The possibilities were nigh on endless. And if he opted for one the whole thing would already have a kind of direction. Possibly not a particularly clear direction, but one which, as the sentences swarmed around the original, would narrow his universe and the options available. Imagine he chose the wrong one and moved towards what might turn out to be a dead end. Where would he put all the remaining sentences?

Furthermore, if he did tackle the impossible task of identifying the second sentence, he would be left facing the same problem with its successor. The whole thing was an endless source of confusion and unendurable decision-making. How many directions could he follow? How many stories on this wall would not be enacted every hour, every day, every night? Which one of these stories was it the Writer's duty to tell? Which system would reveal the unforgettable novel he was brooding over?

But the sentences materialised in higgledy-piggledy form. There didn't seem to be any rhyme or reason, no internal logic in their mode of arrival. When they did eventually appear it was as if they came rushing out and frolicked with him until he went completely insane and had to repair to the hostelry for a pick-me-up.

All this was in his mind as they greeted him. Oh, isn't that the Writer? Well, if it isn't the Writer. And they raised their hats. If only they knew what a mess he was in. What an onus, what a burden he carried. What responsibility rested on one's shoulders when one was endowed with an innate talent of such proportions! Administering it was a job in itself, but how would they know, being equipped with more modest talents and thus humbler goals in life. A talent like his was not a gift, not at all: it was a trial.

As the years passed the number of sentences grew. Now they no longer spread like rings around the original sentence, but hung in thick layers on top of each other like fish scales. The Writer didn't realise, but the wall had become pitted from being perforated year in, year out by the thousands of pins, nails and other convenient objects with which the multifarious small notes bearing hopeful sentences had been fastened. Furthermore, there was the weight of the novel adorning the wall. Late one night it became simply too much. The Writer had just narrowed down the range for the second sentence to two very promising options when the wall capitulated with a crash and scraps of his grand oeuvre fluttered up around his ears and buried him in the mayhem. In his hand he held the sentence which might well become the inscription on his gravestone: 'Only the moody moon was witness to the creation of his work.'

This became all the truer as by an improbable coincidence all the scribbled sentences fell in the correct order at the moment of impact and in a very few minutes (before he was found by a neighbour who was awoken by the crash and before the notes were jumbled up in the confusion) the Writer was indeed buried under The Great Danish Novel.

From *Tingenes uorden*, 2005. (Disorder of Things).

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Translation © Don Bartlett, 2006

"The Writer" featured in *Absinthe: New European Writing*, spring 2008

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF THINGS

He had no firm idea of when it was exactly he first realised things were starting to disappear. To begin with it was just the odd little thing; a screw lid, a left sock. A camera lost on its way to the airport he explained in terms of a momentary lapse of attention and a delivery man who had simply been tempted beyond his strength. Little things disappeared, and reason performed the task of explaining.

Until the morning he got up and couldn't find his shoes. First he gave the hallway a thorough check. The baseboard was lined with straight rows of footwear. He studied each with a critical eye, like a general would his soldiers before an important battle. But his shoes – the ones that most recently had carried him home from the government ministry – were nowhere to be found. The pointless inspection continued longer than was reasonable. It was unlikely that the shoes, having determined to disappear from his life without a trace, all of a sudden would care to pop back into line against the baseboard. Yet he refused to accept that something as fundamental as footwear could disappear.

That was not the way matter behaved. It could be obstructive, but it was an obstructiveness that came of existing, of having substance and shape. Of possessing hardness and inthewayness. He was under no illusion that he was a knowledgeable man, but the few things he did know were things to which he attached great importance. He knew, for example, that orderly surroundings make an orderly mind. And he knew that shoes don't just disappear.

At the government ministry where he was a principal clerk he had won full control of his surroundings. The figures it was his job to administrate were laid out with a careful hand in rows that were straight as a die. These were the greatest pleasure of his daily routine. The way in which they divided the yellow lined paper into four equally dimensioned areas and established such fine symmetry on the page. A complete little cosmos of figures and systematised markings. He had instructed the junior clerk to purchase six large boxes of the yellow paper when he had heard that the manufacturers were about to close down. It was a quantity sufficient for him to feel confident that he would have no need to resort to white paper for as long as he lived.

His desk was placed at a right-angle from the wall, and in the bookcase behind him he had arranged his files. His filing system was not easy for an outsider to fathom. The junior clerk had on several occasions tried in vain to find important documents, but they were subject to an ingenious system that also included the color of the plastic ring binder in which they were placed. For him, however, the system was one way of making matter more pliable and of establishing a manageable arena within which his thoughts could be exercised.

Matter had most certainly not shown itself to be cooperative that morning with the shoes. Having turned the house upside down for the umpteenth time, he sat down ponderously on the sofa. Here he remained for a short moment before sticking his head between his legs and investigating the underside of the sofa for the third time just in case he should have overlooked something the two previous times. All the while his brain was trying to explain away the phenomenon, rationalising its way forward towards ways in which the shoes could have slipped from his feet on his way home without him having noticed.

Later, larger things, too, began to be drawn in. The grandfather clock disappeared one Sunday during a protracted visit to the bathroom. He generally liked to spend fifteen minutes there alone. Today was a Sunday, and he had taken the newspaper in with him. He returned into the living-room and noted the bare space in the corner. The faded clock-shaped discoloration of the wallpaper. On another occasion a whole pan full of rissoles was consumed into the void, leaving him to make do with a refrigerated cheese sandwich. His wife, Elsebeth, disappeared one Tuesday evening after he had been out to buy pipe tobacco.

Yet it was the shoes that tormented him the most. Perhaps it was because it was the disappearance of the shoes that first had disturbed his conception of the order of things and disrupted their rightful cohesion. It was the shoes that had introduced the unpredictability of matter into his life, like a clumsy guide on a mountain slope who pulls an astonished group of tourists with him in his fall into the gorge. The shoes were irrevocably and unforgiveably gone. And with them the grandfather clock, the rissoles and his wife.

It was not that the disappearance of things became routine. It simply became less surprising with time. A whim of nature one in some odd way learns to live with, like a physical disability. It became a natural occurrence of a kind, albeit one contrary to nature.

When he rose in the mornings his rituals of habit now included a thorough round of inspection in the home. Following the disappearance of the rissoles he had drawn up a detailed list of all his possessions in order to help him navigate in what were habitually new and chaotic surroundings. The list ran initially to one-hundred-and-forty-eight pages of yellow lined A4.

His possessions were ordered according to the following taxonomy. Superordinate categories: permanent possessions and temporary possessions. Permanent possessions included his wife and the grandfather clock, all his furniture (including lamps and curtains), his clothes (including shoes, towels, sunglasses, umbrella, wallet, hat and cycle clips), his books, paintings, electronic hardware (including extension leads), kitchenware (including electrical implements, teatowels and dishcloths), tools (including garden tools, writing implements, shaving tackle and three-in-one nail clipper, as well as his wife's knitting machine and sewing box), photo albums, personal documents and letters. Temporary possessions were things towards which he felt no close relationship, for the simple reason that they were not permanent elements in his life. The classification did not make their disappearance any less unacceptable, it was simply part of an endeavour to maintain a grip on what was what. The list of temporary possessions included such things as writing paper, kitchen towels, newspapers and magazines, perishables (including rissoles), cleaning articles, almost everything to do with his personal hygiene (shaving foam, shampoo, toilet paper, toothbrush and toothpaste) and electric light bulbs. Some of the broader categories were elaborated in the form of separate lists. For example, his primary list might specify *Books: five-hundred-and-twelve*. A suspicion as to the disappearance of certain of these would then lead him to consult his booklist in order to identify more precisely which ones were missing.

All of which might sound rather extensive. However, everything soon – *too* soon, for his liking – became a lot more manageable. To facilitate his stocktaking he had spread most of his possessions out on the living-room floor in orderly, well-structured piles. It wasn't long before there was plenty of room

for everything. The idea had come to him the day his bookcases had disappeared, though not his books. It seemed obvious. He had felt quite cheered, invulnerable even, as he spread his remaining possessions out in full unhindered display on the tidy space of the floor. For documentation he had photographed the piles with a disposable camera purchased specifically for the purpose. Yet his efforts proved futile when the camera disappeared only ten minutes later.

Presently, he moved his mattress into the living-room as well (the bedframe had disappeared along with his wife), so that he could sleep in the closest proximity of his possessions. He had yet to experience that things disappeared in front of his eyes, so if he stayed awake long enough he thought he might be able to reduce his losses. He also took a chamber pot into the living-room with him, since a number of his things seemed to be taking the opportunity to disappear during his visits to the bathroom.

His routines were thus subject to constant revision according to the whims of matter. It was humiliating, certainly, but what was he to do? For ease, the piles in the living-room were arranged in accordance with the categories on his leaves of yellow A4. These he placed before each pile, as though they itemised objects in a museum. It worked fine for a day or two until the lists disappeared.

He had awoken from a particularly disconcerting dream whose content immediately disappeared from his mind, and when he looked around him his leaves of yellow A4 were gone, with the exception of the one itemising temporary possessions belonging in the kitchen region. On the other hand, the pile containing temporary possessions belonging in the kitchen region was also gone, exactly as if matter had decided to play a very serious practical joke on him.

It was like he acquiesced there and then. The disappearance of the lists proved too much for him. There was no point any longer. The shoes were gone for ever, just like Elsebeth, and now his very proof of the disappearance of things had itself disappeared. If there was any point at all to all of this, it was utterly concealed for him.

Could it be that there was something wrong with his memory? Perhaps his things had existed only in his head rather than in reality? Perhaps all that matter had never really been *material* at all? He had no way of proving this thought, though it would certainly have explained a lot. He searched desperately through the piles for material references to his memory, but with what was he to compare them if not his memory itself, from which the concept of his things' existence may have emerged? There was Elsebeth, of course, but she was no longer, and there was absolutely no guarantee that she had ever been anything other than a figment of his imagination. The shoes. Had he ever been able to afford such expensive shoes? He really had no idea. The salary he drew each month for his duties at the government ministry might have been something he imagined. It wouldn't have surprised him had it been the case, he thought bitterly, and wished he had possessed the inventiveness to imagine a more extravagant remuneration.

It was then he decided to gather together his final possessions. He placed the remaining things on the mattress, four books, a local newspaper, the remote control for the television that had long since disappeared, a sock without a partner, a corkscrew, an empty shoebox containing old family snaps (of which only those from his schooldays remained), a breadknife, a pair of bathroom scales, a vase, his grandfather's pocket watch, a disposable ballpoint pen advertising the services of an undertaker, and a single bedsheet. A heap of unreliable matter,

he thought as he tied the corners of the sheet together. He carried the bundle out onto the street.

The car had disappeared, so he took a taxi. The bundle rattled every time they went over a bump, but diminished all the while they neared the coast.

The weather was cold and gray, and he was all alone when he dumped the bundle into the sea. He stood at the end of the bathing jetty, one sock and a laced shoe, and let the sea tug at the white sheet as the remainder of his things slowly sank to the bottom. At last he could no longer see them through the rush of murky waves, and on that account he felt strangely relieved.

From *Tingenes uorden*, 2005. (Disorder of Things)

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“The Disappearance of Things” featured in *Chattanooga Review*, 2011

THE FLOUNDER

I heard about Otto Hoffmeyer in the winter of '98.

My long-term partner at the chess club, Thomas Elsass, had met him personally in several occasions. They had once been in the same philosophy course at the university a couple of years before: *The Paradoxical Self in Kierkegaard's Writings*. In addition, that same year, in early spring, he had gone to a faculty gathering at the house of one of the younger lecturers, where Otto Hoffmeyer had also been present. My chess partner could verify that Otto had behaved quite normally at this time, which one generally does at gatherings of this nature, and there had therefore been no cause for surprise or concern. The following semester he didn't turn up for his studies, but that is nothing out of the ordinary either, and the university friends he spoke most to assumed he had taken a leave of absence inasmuch as they speculated about his absence at all.

Thus there was nothing in his behaviour to suggest that anything untoward had happened to him. But the event which subsequently took place was so extraordinary that we had to delve into the reasons for its occurrence. Thomas Elsass paid a call on Otto Hoffmeyer's girlfriend, who – although she didn't know it herself – gave him a useful lead which put us on his trail. She had been abroad at the time of the accident, but she was able to tell us that Otto Hoffmeyer had become very taciturn towards the end.

This snippet of information was what was allowed us to reconstruct the events, as in a game of chess, to unravel all the moves, to chart what went wrong. For, in life, as in a game of chess, there is always an Archimedean point, a fulcrum which determines future actions. These are the fruits of our efforts.

The fatal event, the catalyst, must have taken place earlier the same year, possibly at the beginning of the summer. The extraordinary thing is that it happened without him or anyone else noticing. He was in his late twenties, and he was on vacation from the university when a word unobtrusively slipped out of his vocabulary. The word was 'flounder', which for its part was innocuous enough. It is possible to pass through life unscathed without this word.

Naturally, he didn't detect the loss. Had he done so, the awareness of the existence of the missing words would have simply been predetermined, which would have meant nothing was missing. But at that moment he was sitting in a restaurant and had to forgo the flounder, which he would have fancied, if he had known.

The flounder disappeared, or to be more precise, it remained where it was, in other words, with the chef in the kitchen where it splashed around in a tub of water to stay fresh for as long as possible. Of course he had experienced searching for a word before. He had often lain awake at night trying to remember the name of such and such an actor who was in such and such a film, the title of which he had also suddenly forgotten. It was a kind of contagious forgetfulness whereby one memory marker after the other fell like dominoes. He could imagine the actor in a different film, in which there was another famous actor, whose name he would immediately forget, in the same way as he also forgot the film title.

He had discovered a system to deal with the times when this strange, fatiguing phenomenon occurred. First of all, he searched through the alphabet until he found the letter with which he intuitively felt the desired name or word started. Another solution he had had some success with was, as it were, to place the word on a mental glass plate so that he could read the word on the other side. Of course it was a trick; he was fooling his subconscious into revealing what he was after. But the difference between these situations and that of the restaurant was that, as far as the former were concerned, he knew something was missing. To such an extent that he was almost hyperventilating with irritation as he turned over all the Scrabble letters. Once he lay awake for three consecutive nights until, with an orgiastic mental manoeuvre, he rooted out the particular word from the depths of his subconscious: 'approval'. Another time he had read almost all the words in the dictionary under 'c' before it came to him that the word he was looking for was 'precarious'.

But none of this could be compared with what happened that evening at the restaurant. If the concept had been in his head, he would have had fillet of fish and that is the crucial difference. The concept was lost. That was the point, the fatal move which Thomas Elsass and I suspected destiny had played in its game with Otto Hoffmeyer.

In this context, the most remarkable occurrence was his reaction when, as fate would have it, a couple of weeks later he was served a magnificent freshly caught specimen cooked in butter without even ordering it. It was one of those mishaps which the numbers 6 and 9 will have on their conscience. An elderly gentlemen on table 9 had ordered fish; Otto Hoffmeyer on table 6 had decided to try his luck with le plat du jour. The chef finished preparing both meals at the same time and threw

the waiter's order numbers down beside each plate. However, because the waiter in his haste read the numbers upside down, each found its way to the other table. The gentleman on table 9 was pleasantly surprised to get a portion of roast pork with parsley sauce and failed to mention anything about the fish to the waiter.

At table 6, on the other hand, Otto Hoffmeyer sat staring at his plate where the crispy golden flounder lay alongside three small new potatoes, a pinch of dill and a blob of homemade tartar sauce. He was rather taken aback, but devoured the dill, the lemon and the three small potatoes without taking his eyes off the large, flat, brown object for one second. With a forbearing smile, he made it clear to the waiter that they needn't have bothered with the thing, but the rest tasted good.

Later his concepts of halibut, herring, rockfish, angler fish and the weever fish vanished too, yes, the whole fish family disappeared along with Italian and French cuisine. Presumably he also lost the ability to *recognise* these dishes and thus to comprehend them in the context they should be comprehended. In short, they no longer existed for him. He simply couldn't *see* them in the deepest sense of the word. He found himself turning to a variety of hot dog stalls, snack bars and the butcher's small trays of odd slushy salads. This limited his diet to quite an extent, but he found a certain peace of mind in the practical ready made meals from the supermarket freezers, as their contents were indefinable in a much more expected and thus acceptable way. Faced with this phenomenon, it is by no means unique to lose words.

Some of the words which dropped out of the range of his consciousness for ever were of course more important than others. He could manage perfectly well without adjectives,

at least at first. All they did for him was to give the world colour and a smell, make it concrete and recognisable. Whether any given object is green or red, pale or inflamed, neither adds to nor detracts from its essence. It is not important whether the chair is unattractive or rickety so long as you can sit in it without it collapsing. And because he wasn't aware himself that his world had shrivelled into a grey indeterminate mass, he didn't miss it. To know this, he would have required a frame of reference, the ability to compare with richer colours, which, according to our analysis, he had lost.

It wasn't something which impeded his dealings with other people. Everyone knew examples of a reticent type of person who eschewed the use of adjectives, and even though, in the opinion of my friend and chess partner, Thomas Elsass, he had been fairly colourful in his choice of language before, no-one was disconcerted by his new predispositions. Even his girlfriend did not miss it. Whenever she asked, her bottom never looked big.

The next thing to happen was that a large part of his everyday life ceased to exist for him in its previous form. He no longer knew how he spent most of his time as the next word to leak from his dwindling vocabulary was 'philosophy'. So far he had invested five years of his life preparing for his final dissertation, which he had supposed would constitute the culmination of all his thinking hitherto, clad in an unparalleled – except in literature - lustrous linguistic costume. Now, however, the human race would have to forgo the solution to problems of consciousness because the loss of the concept of philosophy triggered an erosion of his scheme of the world, and so Kant, Socrates, qualia, consciousness, the 20th century and the sentence "What is it like to be a bat?" were gone too.

Fortunately he was familiar with the practice of taking summer holidays and he didn't feel that he was missing out on anything. In reality the only consequence the loss of the concept of philosophy brought was that he didn't turn up for his university course as planned on 1st September. No-one felt any sense of loss: neither his girlfriend who worked in a record shop during the day, nor his student friends, nor for that matter humanity in general, which was unaware that the problems of consciousness would otherwise have been resolved.

Thus life continued on its way, much as normal. As regards the word 'way', he lost the word from his vocabulary, but that didn't remotely stop him from making his own way. He had no problems walking. And, strangely enough, the verb 'walk' didn't disappear until six months later when he looked outside his door for his shoes, the concept of which promptly receded, and so he had to leave his hallway totally barefoot.

As the words went missing, he saw his world being reduced. When 'corkscrew' went, he experienced a brief period of frustration until the concept of 'wine' also came to grief and calm was restored. Accordingly, Thomas Elsass and I agreed that there was a certain order to things. The term 'arm bends' vanished, which was convenient as – if the truth has to be told (although the concept of truth had gone the same way as philosophy) – he was no sportsman; and when his concept of insults and abuse went, no-one felt the loss, least of all him.

As we moved towards December and the days became shorter and colder, he still maintained his morning routine of sitting barefoot on a bench by the lakes and reading his newspaper while feeding the ducks with his breakfast leftovers. Thomas Elsass had been told about the bare feet by Otto Hoffmeyer's girlfriend, who had been told by the person living in the flat below Otto's.

We guessed that the concept of 'winter' had gone, just like the adjectives 'cold' and 'blue', and the contents of his morning meal had changed from rolls to the butcher's salads so that the ducks kept their distance. The morning walks to the lakes were nowhere near the pleasure they had once been, and as December approached his health was deteriorating.

Fortuitously, his world still included the word 'doctor', and as he was only too aware, laryngitis and sticky mucus were not particularly pleasant, so he arranged an appointment.

At this point one wonders how, on a purely physical level, he got through his daily activities and how it must have felt generally to have such a woeful conceptual framework in a richly varied world. One has to imagine that the practical matters of the day were carried out in a thick fog of strange objects and people, whose words and actions must have seemed unreal to him. After protracted reflection my chess partner and I came to the conclusion that we were mistaken. He simply didn't discover the existence of those things which he with his limitations wasn't able to comprehend anyway. In his own eyes his world was complete.

Otto Hoffmeyer met his doctor. The doctor was the classic sort with white coat, stethoscope and a pair of very thick glasses, which effectively cut him off from the reality his patients represented. In other words, there was no chance that the doctor would detect his actual problem. Only its symptoms, the deep cough and the singular appearance - a consequence of the most important source of nourishment coming from butcher's salads - were of interest to the doctor. The doctor scribbled down a few things on a yellow scrap of paper, which he put into the hand of our conceptually impoverished friend. Then he mumbled a whole gamut of things in a kind of Danish

only spoken in a small number of exclusive circles and one which you didn't need to be stricken by a defecting vocabulary in order not to understand. The doctor held a mini-lecture about the outstanding qualities of a certain pink pill. The pill might put him in a better frame of mind, the doctor said. It would be like going on a never-ending holiday.

Not one of the things the doctor said made any impression on him, except the word 'holiday', which remained hanging in the air, and he took it home with the yellow note, which, in his world, was no more than just a note.

The holiday was soon arranged. Nowadays most things can be organised over the phone, so long as you have the patience to wait a long time – and you are not bothered by talking to a machine. He not only managed to book a ticket, but also to turn up at the airport punctually.

In the plane on his way to the Spanish island (whose name was gone the moment he boarded, along with 'plane', 'holiday', 'cabin pressure' and the sentence 'What are you doing, you idiot?') he was amused by the tray of all the funny, small, plastic dishes of warm food, the cakes with glacé cherries and the bowl-shaped, plastic cups with coffee slopping around. He wondered how far it was to Hans Knudsens Plads. His thoughts were now such that the few remaining concepts slipped into random gaps in sentences, creating unpredictable meanings.

Thomas Elsass and I imagine the tragic accident to have occurred in the following way.

After pouring the coffee in the magazine holder in front of him, placing the glacé cherry in his neighbour's notebook and arranging a Wiener Schnitzel in his breast pocket, he picked up the small salad, noted the white treetops outside, pressed the button, got up and walked towards the exit. Here he

got a good grip on the handle and tugged while enjoying the whistling of ducks and the bloody elk which seemed to turn the explosion of the wind for ever.

Otto Hoffmeyer plunged downwards for want of concepts.

But Thomas Elsass and I, sitting hunched over the chequered board which proffers such endless scope with so few rules, often imagine what would have happened to Otto if there had been no accident, if he had continued to live his life without any concepts. One variant is that there was a rich old lady with heavy gold jewellery and hair piled high on her head travelling with him on board the plane on her way to her flat on Mallorca and she was able to use a young man like him who had little to say, but was both clean and amenable. However, we always agree that the way it ended was best for him. In the minutes he was flying through the air we have a mental picture of the remaining concepts quietly fading away, now as quiet as the state of his consciousness. He was in that wonderful place, free and happy, without any idea that it would soon be over.

From *Tingenes uorden*, 2005. (Disorder of Things).

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THE GIRAFFE

Just one look and he knew they belonged together. His life would never be the same again, and he would do everything in his power to release it, however crazy that sounded, even to his own ears. It was probably what was termed a necessity, he mused.

He didn't know how he had got into this position. It was, to put it mildly, abnormal for a man of his years – a man with wife, family and permanent job, a local defence man and chairman of the house owners' association – to skip work and go to the zoo. It wasn't easy to take yourself seriously either, and he almost sniggered at the thought of his curious trip. Here he was, standing in the middle of the zoo, with his tie on, chuckling. The woman in front of him with the housewife's hairdo, rucksack and rural accent turned round and gave him a look which suggested that he was perverted, or worse.

However, he had suddenly realised why he'd had the urge to get off the bus and walk straight through the main entrance into the zoo and to the caged giraffe. He stood there with his briefcase and eau de cologne, and began to laugh out loud, almost relieved, because it was only now, this very moment, that his life had meaning. The world took on colour, sound, smell and everything clicked into place as he repeated the words 'my giraffe' inside his head.

It stretched its long neck over the fence and blinked its excessively long eyelashes as it chewed with its lower jaw. Its soft mouth; its aroma of giraffe. He stood by the cage for a long time. It wasn't something he could tell anyone else. His wife,

Inge, wouldn't understand. Nor his boss, Mr Møller. He would have to tell his wife that he had been at work and his boss that he had been ill. A bout of flu, or perhaps a short-lived virus, although he knew this was anything but short-lived. It was here to stay.

The following time he had taken nuts along with him. He had been to the library and studied giraffes' eating habits, and while he hadn't found anything about nuts, he knew instinctively that nuts were right. Didn't it munch twigs and buds from the acacia trees on the savannah? Obviously they didn't feed it nuts at the zoo; they drew the line at corn and rolled oats – although it had to be said in their defence that they also imported hay especially from Africa. But you couldn't trust anyone who could find it in their hearts to lock up such a beautiful, innocent animal. They obviously didn't understand its needs. If they had done, they wouldn't have locked it up; hence you knew they were not to be trusted. Ergo, nuts. Nuts and eau de cologne.

He had left his tie at home. You can have too much of a good thing. He had got up at the usual time, put on his suit, a freshly-pressed clean shirt, no tie though. Then he had taken his briefcase and kissed his wife goodbye, exactly as usual. He had to take precautions and make sure he didn't become the focus of unnecessary attention or concern. It wasn't that the giraffe represented a direct threat to his relationship with his wife; it was simply that his and the giraffe's fates were strangely interwoven. It changed nothing and yet it changed everything. Inge must not become concerned, so he left for work as he always did. With books about giraffes' eating habits in his briefcase.

Every day he turned up with a bag of nuts – always new kinds, but never almonds. It was important to remember

that the concentration of Prussic acid in this particular nut would simply kill the animal. He spent a lot of hours in the zoo while he was making plans. There were so many loose ends he had to keep track of before he made a move. You should not simply rush headlong into anything. It had to be prepared, down to the last detail.

It wasn't just a matter of releasing the giraffe. As difficult as that was, it wasn't the issue. Had he heard of anyone else embarking upon such an insane venture? No, *he* hadn't at any rate. You had to laugh at the idea; he did. If only that was all there was to it, but you had to look forward in time. Had he any idea where they would live, for example? He couldn't just roll up with a giraffe. That much he did know. Inge would consider that beyond the pale, bordering on the eccentric. She was nice, but there were a number of things she couldn't appreciate. The necessity of it would be beyond her. Apart from that, their garden was too small. No, that wouldn't do. The summer house was an option, but after careful analysis of the pros and cons it was rejected on the bench in front of the cage with the autumnal red and yellow leaves falling in his lap. What would he tell Inge? Inge was the problem. Inge, every blessed time. He heaved a sigh of resignation and gave the giraffe a fat little macadamia nut.

The zookeeper was beginning to get suspicious about him: he quickly realised that. At closing time he would pass the cage and fix him with that firm look he used on other people's naughty children and say the zoo was closing now. After a while the keeper would even escort him to the gates, where he would stand and watch him leave.

On Saturdays when he was supposed to meet the others in the local defence unit, he put on his uniform, placed the leafy green forage cap on his head and went to the zoo. He

took a lot more care with his morning ablutions on Saturdays. Last time he left wearing his uniform and eau de cologne he noticed Inge giving him a funny look. As if she were thinking her own thoughts. He would have to avoid that at all costs. Take some precautionary measures.

At night, though, everything was easy. He sat on the bench at the front of the cage and suddenly the bars opened. They turned into autumnal leaves fluttering into his lap. They became branches he could climb up, all the way up to the giraffe. They were sounds which climbed and rose over the savannah towards the pale full moon hovering above them. At night he and the giraffe were united.

His boss had called to speak to Inge; Inge had spoken to his boss. He could feel that. Was asking about his flu and prying into his private life. He noticed her glances when he left in the morning with his briefcase full of books about giraffes' eating habits, literature about the gem of the savannah, the bag of nuts and the aroma of eau de cologne. Which had in some ungovernable way been replaced by the stench of yak and camel when he returned in the evening. They had their suspicions, did Inge and his boss. And then there were Inge's whisperings to the children. If only they would spare him the looks and leave him in peace.

At night, though, the sounds of the savannah grew, indefinable sounds, exotic sounds, sounds he had never heard in Vangede or any other place. The bars fell and became a bridge, no, wait, a wood raft, which they drifted off on, away, out onto the open sea, and he awoke from his euphoria when Inge switched on the light and gave him The Look.

Inge had rifled through his briefcase and found all the giraffe books. She asked him what he was actually doing with all the books. She wept. He had to lie and tell her he was

studying something to do with a case at work. Inge couldn't understand why it was necessary to research giraffes' eating habits in a loans and interest rates department in a building society; she couldn't understand how the two things were connected; she had always thought that his daily routine consisted of figures and the occasional telephone conversation, an annual Christmas dinner and a salary increase of 1.7%. She didn't have a clue what was going on inside him. What was happening?

This was a special mission he couldn't tell her anything about, unfortunately. He would really have liked to, but it wasn't in his gift. It was classified. It was better that she didn't know any more, for her own sake.

From now on, he would have to tread warily. The giraffe books were a blunder. He hadn't taken any precautions. The bringing together of him and the giraffe was a task of such immensely difficult proportions that it required his full attention.

He sat on the bench in front of the giraffe's cage and made his meticulous calculations on squared paper. All the elements which had to be factored in if you were going to do it properly. Nothing could be left to chance. You couldn't rely on anyone; even the caging of the giraffe gave rise to suspicion. They lived in a world, he concluded, where mistrust was the only way to survive. That was the only thing that could connect him with the giraffe and the pale moon over the savannah.

The calculations multiplied in line with the constant emergence of new elements, and one pad after the other was filled to the margins with precise calculations of the angle of descent of autumn leaves, the carrying capacity of the raft and the loudness of laughter. If he laughed really loud, could the

raft handle it? He tried it. He laughed louder. No. More was needed. He would have to make further calculations.

The children stayed with their grandparents. Inge talked and wept, wept and talked. He couldn't remember what she said. He missed the savannah. Well, strictly speaking, he had never been there, he was aware of that of course, but he missed it anyway, its sounds, its herds of gnus. Inge's mouth turned into a large, pale moon floating over the savannah. And the words flowed out of it, chords of words, just gushing out of her mouth, like narrow outlets of a river which collected into bigger rivers and finally joined the great open oceans. The words bore him along. He laughed. Why hadn't he thought of that? All the complicated calculations and he hadn't seen it. So straightforward. So simple. He flowed with them, he didn't put up any resistance, allowed himself to be borne along, and as Inge talked, it went faster and faster, it was easier and easier, the force of the words was perfect, it carried him to the cage, to the giraffe cage. Everything was so simple, so very simple that he had to laugh, and he saw the bars folding down and forming rafts which were to carry them. He saw themselves being carried, the giraffe and he, drifting away, gone, away out onto the great open sea. The moon hung as it should, in the star-studded sky above the dark water, and he could already smell the savannah.

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