

Stefanie Höfler

The Big Black Bird

For you, Johanna, for later

You're here, still

Throw your fear
into the air

Soon
your time is over
soon
heaven grows
under the grass
your dreams fall
into nowhere

Still
the carnation smells sweetly
the thrush sings
still you may love
give words away
you are here, still

Be what you are
Give what you have

Rose Ausländer

(Translated by Julia Samwer)

(<https://www.lyrikline.org/en/poems/noch-bist-du-da-555?showmodal=en>)

BEFORE

My very first memory is that of Ma, way up in a tree. It must have been fall because all around her are leaves, curled in bizarre shapes, no longer green but not yet all brown. When she moves, I hear a dry crackling as of elves whispering from under the tree.

Ma is standing high up on a branch, the highest one strong enough to carry her weight. She's plucking chestnuts as though they were apples, throwing them down to me without looking, too rapidly for me to catch them all. Some hit me on my arms or shoulders, and finally gather around my feet with a rustling noise. I carefully peel them out of their hedgehog shells to collect them all in my sweater like in an apron. When the chestnuts cease dropping for a moment, I dig my hand deep into the pile of red brown balls, petting them like smooth, faceless little animals.

A few steps away, the other kids from our street stand, looking up, their hands shielding their eyes against the sunlight.

The scents are of everything that is there: of the half-curved, half-dried leaves, of the sun-warmed bark of the chestnut tree, a little bit of soil, and a hint of cooking oil caught in the hair of one of the kids. The only thing you can't smell is chestnuts. Chestnuts have no smell.

"What's your mom doing up there?" one of the boys asks.

"Picking chestnuts," I say. "We want to build chestnut animals."

"But they'll come down all by themselves," someone remarks. "Tomorrow or the day after."

"But we need them today."

Ma's triangular face appears among all the other triangles of blue sky formed by the branches, her long rust-red hair and the slightly lighter dry leaves frame the wide smile of her bright redlips. Everything about her glistens with joy.

I am roughly four years old, and everything I see is as normal as can be.

Sunday morning

On Sunday, October 1st, at 7.02, I saw a defibrillator inaction for the first and only time in my life. Two paramedics were using one of these yellow devices (this yellow device), which have been mounted on the walls of shopping centers for a number of years. They are used to bring people back to life. Which was exactly what they were trying with my mom.

"Stand clear. Now!"

"No. Again. Stand clear. Now!" I heard, as I watched the two men in their bright red suits leaning over Ma. All I could see was the dark red mass of her hair spread out on the floor like a carpet. One of the men was kneeling on it. Ma was lying on the floor. The defibrillator looked somewhat like a toolbox with a monitor on which was a distinctly blue straight line, quivering slightly. In between the mens' shouts I heard a pumping noise, followed by a kind of clattering. And in between an eerie silence. Shout, pump, clatter, silence. Shout, pump, clatter, silence.

I stood there for exactly three of those cycles until Pa noticed me by the door. He came over and took me by the shoulder. His ice-cold hand guided me outside into the dark hallway. He looked down at me without saying a word.

"Stand clear. Now!" I heard again, in exactly the same tone of voice as before, like a stuck record, and then, just before my father left me behind in the hallway to go back to the bedroom, very softly: " We lost her."

In the darkness of the hallway I could make out all the familiar shapes: the bulky, brownish chest of drawers from Pa's student days, which Ma called "the monster", a stand holding a bunch of tattered umbrellas, and a life-sized knight I had built from wood scraps in first grade and which Pa had liked so much that it stood in the hallway ever since. At that moment, these items, which I had hardly noticed for all those years, seemed to have taken on a different shape and size. As if I'd wound up in one of those silly films where somebody gets shrunk, so the world they know so well suddenly becomes alien and surreal.

Next to the lopsided knight stood Crumb. A second knight, almost as motionless as the other, only much shorter and in his pajamas. When he was younger my brother used to call himself Crumb, in reference to Nils Holgersson's hamster. Only recently, he decided he wanted to be called Carl, but of course everybody just kept calling him Crumb.

Crumb was crying. If Crumb really was a hamster, his whiskers would be quivering from his crying, because it makes his upper lip twitch persistently and steadily like a nibbling hamster. There are various kinds of Crumb crying. There's the annoyed tired crying that every six-year-old has down anyway, then the but-I-really-want-to-have-that crying, slightly more piercing and available on command, or the attention-deficit crying. Crumb needs way more attention than I do.

But this crying was different. Crumb was crying much softer than usual, almost inaudible, and tears were running down his cheeks at a remarkable speed. As if

crying had simply replaced his breathing. And he didn't stop when I bent down and tried to hug him.

When the other one only stands there like a frozen fish, a hug won't work. So I let go of him right away, nudged him into the kitchen and sat him down in his beloved high chair. I suddenly noticed his legs dangling like he was my old longarmed monkey: Crumb's legs looked much too long, like they had grown twenty centimeters overnight. Even though there were enough chairs in our kitchen, I sat down on the floor, leaning my back against the big cupboard. Its doors responded to the pressure with a soft moan that sounded like a "Well, well". It was sort of the first thing anybody said to me that morning.

For five minutes, Crumb and I sat in the kitchen without saying a word, just staring into space, I at about sixty centimeters from the ground, Crumb at one meter. The only thing to be heard was Crumb snuffling once in a while, a disgusting little snot sound, which hit a rhythm with the steady sequence of sounds from next door: Sniff, shout, pump, clatter, silence.

Then all sounds, save the sniffing, stopped and Pa entered the kitchen.

When my dad enters a room, it's quite a moment. He's almost 2 meters tall and has shoulders like a triple world swimming champion. To pass through any normal door he has to duck slightly, which makes his whole body tilt, and that way he appears even more massive.

My friend Janus says, the first time he came to visit me at home he was afraid of my dad. And Janus is not easily frightened.

On that particular Sunday morning though, my father didn't look imposing at all. His face looked unnaturally pale, as if somebody had touched it up to emphasize all the dark parts in it: the narrow furrows that ran from his nose to the corners of his mouth, the shadows around his deep-set eyes, his three-day beard. This black-and-white face made him look older than usual. Much older. When I saw that, I knew there would be no surprise, no reversal of what I had seen in the bedroom before. No last-minute rescue. Silence. Silence. Silence. Silence.

"Ben."

Pa looked me in the eye as if he'd just come back from a far-away world and had to cling to my gaze so he wouldn't be sucked back into it against his will, like some science fiction hero.

He breathed, in and out, in and out, until he continued talking.

"They couldn't bring back your Ma anymore."

Crumb slid down from his chair. I got up automatically, so the three of us, Crumb, Pa and I met in the middle of the room like three magnets reacting in a delayed fashion. In slow-motion, Pa extended his long arms like a huge harvester, and pulled us both into his embrace.

I couldn't think of when he had last hugged me. Maybe that time when I got laughed at in school as a third-grader, after I had slipped on a dog turd at school. Pa had hugged me, even though he himself ended up covered all over in dog poo. Maybe it is altogether uncommon for fathers and sons to hug. Or maybe my dad just saved his hugs for special occasions.

That's what I was thinking at that moment, as I pressed my face against his belly, breathing his smell, this light touch of tobacco which clings even to his pajamas. But I was also thinking that Ma hugged me so much more, always against my reluctance, in her very own way, firmly and at the same time somehow loosely, and how her embrace felt, with her long strands of hair tickling my face and her glass bangles tingling softly behind my back.

Ma died on a glorious October day. When somebody dies in a story it is typically a rainy day. Or a day shrouded in fog when not a single beam of sunlight penetrates the heavy clouds. That suits the occasion much better and emphasizes the somber state of mind associated with death.

But I don't want this story to be a gloomy one. I am not even sure if I find it gloomy at all. I don't even know if this will make a story in the end. But if it does, it will be about how it feels when somebody suddenly dies. What the first few days are like, how you cope with it. Or don't.

In any case I do believe that if I tell such a story I must tell it exactly as it was, including the weather. And here is how it was: The day my mother died, suddenly and completely unexpectedly, was a gorgeous fall day. A day when the apples on the apple trees smell so sweet and ripe that it makes you want one, even if you hate apples. Actually, I probably never passed a single apple tree that day, or if I did, I didn't notice. Because that day, nothing was like it usually was, but totally different. And of course, from then on, nothing was ever the same.

BEFORE

"The apple trees stay."

Ma is standing with her legs apart in the middle of the playground, her hands propped on her waist. The man wearing a bright orange vest looks cluelessly, first at Ma, than at me. In his right hand, he holds a chainsaw, and on his head, he has a silly small white cap to protect him against the summer sun. He looks around, but there's nobody there, only a few kids who stand behind the barrier tape not daring to cross. And Ma, who's planted right in front of him, blocking his way while holding me by the hand. Behind him, there are huge piles of leaves and branches from the hedge surrounding the playground. The hedge now looks quite bare and square. Lined up on the grass, are the two big beech trees, cut into slices like enormous sausages.

"I am supposed to get rid of the old trees, and then in the fall new ones..." the man starts out in a hoarse voice. And when Ma interrupts him, he might be about to stop short anyway, just because she's standing there the way she is, looking at him the way she does.

"Apple is a hardwood, it takes a long time to grow. If you cut down the apple trees as well, there is no more shade in the playground," Ma tells him in a loud voice. Then she takes the man by the hand, pulling him along. Because I'm hanging on to her other hand, we are now strung up in a chain, Ma and I, and the man, who's too startled to object.

"Feel this," Ma says now with a softer voice, letting go of my hand to put in on the tree bark. I do the same. The trunk of the old apple tree feels knobby under the palm of my hand. Seen from up close, it looks like a petrified wrinkled cloth. The color, too, seems rather like stone - not brown, as we're used to painting it at kindergarten, but more like gray, and somehow ancient.

The man is the last to lay his palm on the trunk, and I notice how similar his hand and the bark are: knotty, rough, furrowed in dry wrinkles. He stands like this for a little while, his rough hand on the rough tree trunk, casting a weary look at Ma.

Meanwhile, Ma has removed her hand from the tree to grasp mine again, so we are just standing there watching the man do nothing. Brittle little pieces of bark are stuck between our hands, and I can hear Ma breathing, very calmly. She looks down at me from the corner of her eye, winking at me, just before the man takes down his hand from the gray-brown tree trunk and sighs. He adjusts his silly hat, takes his chainsaw and leaves. From above, out of the spared apple tree, a leaf floats down in salute and settles on my shoulder. I let go of Ma to pluck it from my sweater and put it into my pocket.

The apple tree is still there on the playground, and meanwhile Crumb is the same age that I was then, playing in the shaded sandbox. And even today, whenever I see those apple trees I have to think: Apple is a hardwood. Maybe that's when Ma passed on to me her odd obsession with trees.

(Translation: Nani Schumann - nschumann@hotmail.com)