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We Have Lived Here Since the Day We Were Born



Sample translation by Stuart Vizard

***Wir leben hier, seit wir geboren sind* by Andreas Moster**

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A man comes to our village and turns the stones and the heads of the girls. The stones are lying on a white wall which protects the village from the slope of the mountainside. The girls are sitting in the village square, watching the man as he turns over the stones. The man saunters along the wall, picks up the stones with his right hand and lays them back down again upside down. The girls' heads follow the man's slow movements as he makes his way along the wall. He is carrying a suitcase in his left hand, his tall, thin figure leaning slightly over to the left from the weight of it. The girls saw how the man heaved the suitcase down from the train. They have nothing to do. Their boredom hangs heavily in the air like a thunderstorm. Their hands are placed between their legs while they watch the man making his way along the white wall, turning over the stones. When the man reaches the end of the wall, the girls hold their breath. The man turns over the final stone and sets down his suitcase. In that very moment, anything might happen. The sky might fall in, the mountain might topple into the valley, the man might collapse. The girls might tear out his entrails while he is still alive. But we do nothing. Just sit there, hands between our legs, watching as the man picks up his suitcase and crosses the village square, a tall, thin figure who has come to our village from the outside.

I dream about the man that very night. The thunderstorm has got caught between the mountains and cannot move on. It batters its bowed head against the mountain slope over and over again, booms about the crags and reels back down into the village in a raging fury, hurling its bolts of lightning at our feet and spitting in our faces until it is spent. The gentle rumbling sends me off to sleep. In my dream, the man opens his suitcase and takes out a world, a knife, a growth in my belly, a child. The man places the things onto the table before me – the world, the knife, the child. With the knife, he cuts the world into two halves, I am to choose one, but the halves are identical and I cannot decide between them. The growth in my belly burns like a black star condensed to the size of a nut. I want to ask the man to cut it out with the knife, but my voice is empty and hollow and my plea exhales soundlessly against his cheek.

“Speak up, child.”

I am not a child anymore. I cannot speak. The man thrusts his finger into my mouth and tests my vocal cords by running his finger along them as if they were



the strings of a violin. I make a sound and the man runs his finger up over my tongue and out of my mouth.

“You can speak, child.”

I am not a child anymore. I try to speak.

“Take the nut out.”

My voice is the squawk of a bird that has fallen from its nest. The man picks me up and holds me in his hands. As he opens me up with his finger, I scream and the scream wakes me.

The thunderstorm is lying defeated on the mountain slope. It has taken on the form of a mountain goat, its hooves protruding stiffly out into the road, its head resting in a hollow which is slowly filling with tears and saliva. Its horns are dispersing in the moonlight. From my window, I watch the disintegration of the goat. The wisps of cloud move off towards the north, deeper into the mountains, to the goats’ graveyard. The air will be clear in the morning, cleansed of all impurity. This spring has brought countless thunderstorms with it. The man is coming to a clean village, the dirt clings to the goats’ bellies which scrape away at the paving stones night after night.

The dream stays with me into the day. At breakfast, I cut the bread into two halves, my father cannot decide between them and eyes me suspiciously, perhaps sensing what the man did to me in the night. He takes one of the halves and squeezes my hand holding the knife.

“Don’t try to fool me, child.”

I am not a child anymore. I try to speak.

“Let go of my hand.”

My father’s gaze goes right through me, a mist gathers before his eyes, shrouding the piercing blue in which my mother drowned long ago. His hand squeezes so tightly that I scream and it does not wake me. The knife clatters down onto the table. My father blinks, breathes in and cocks his head to one side. The mist before his eyes disperses like the horns of the mountain goat. He lets go of my hand and gets up from the table, stuffing the piece of bread into his mouth and grinding it to a pulp. Don’t ever try to fool me again, my child, it’s my bread you’re eating. As he leaves the kitchen, my mother recoils before him like a reed bending in the breeze. She listens to my father’s footsteps in the hall, then sits down beside me and examines my hand.

“Move your fingers.”



“I can’t.”

“Try.”

I shake my head, my fingers are stiff and red from my father’s grip. My mother takes me over to the sink and runs water over them. The water does my hand good. Tentatively, I move my fingers. The sink is made of the same white stone as the wall which the man made his way along and turned over the stones. In my mind’s eye, I watch him cross the village square, his spindly figure leaning slightly over to the left from the weight of his suitcase.

We did not see where he went, whether he stayed or, after turning over the stones, left us again. A stabbing, yearning pain creeps into my hand. I wrench it from the sink, sending a shimmering arc of water through the kitchen from the sink over the table to the door which hangs for an instant in mid-air before all the drops of water simultaneously fall to earth and split the kitchen into two halves on either side of a thin trail of water. My mother is sitting at the table. The trail of water glitters along her parting, she too will split in half and fall to earth on either side of the chair. She sits there in silence, dumbstruck. She runs her fingers along her parting, brings them to her nose and sniffs, then wipes them on her dress. The two halves of my mother are identical, I cannot decide between them. She lifts her head and looks up, but the ceiling is quite cloudless.

We are in for a lovely day.

The streets are clean.

My right hand throbs like a crab that has spent too long out in the sun and cannot find its way back to the water. I try to hold the books, but fail. One after another, they fall to the floor and lie there, open – *Linear Functions and Equations, An Approach to Language, The Origins of African Species*. I pick up the books with my left hand, a strange sensation, my right hand dangles uselessly. On the way to school, the throbbing begins to wear off. It is only by the time I arrive that it has stopped completely.

At school, we draw a picture of the man before going to the wall. Ada draws the legs and passes the paper on, Cass draws the torso and passes the paper on, Lilianne draws the cock and passes the paper on, Séraphine draws the arms and passes the paper on, I draw the head and pass the paper back to Ada. Ada spits on the man’s cock and passes the paper on, Cass smears the spittle over the man’s cock and passes the paper on, Lilianne kisses the man’s cock and passes the paper



on, Séraphine passes the paper on, and I draw the eyes and horns of a goat on the man's head. The man is just skin and bones. His chest is emaciated, the ribs clearly showing through. His arms are long and skinny and straight, as are his legs and cock, from which Ada's spittle is running. Ada's spittle is thick and warm. The man's neck is long and thin and lifts his head high above his body. The head of a beast from the plains of Africa.

An African goat.

The horns spiral upwards in black coils against the sky, the head is craned back, the lips are pinched together to form a single, bloodless line. In the small eyes, there is a deep, smouldering glow that flickers like candlelight. The man's body is entirely white. I do not dare to touch him. His beauty is immaculate, like that of a wild animal. I trace the contours of his body with my finger, the legs, the arms, making one complete circuit until he is trapped inside an invisible cocoon which drives him into a frenzy. His legs kick out backwards, his arms lash out in all directions, his horns pierce the cocoon and tear it to shreds. The strained sinews in the goat's neck are about to snap, its wild and desperate eyes catch sight of me. The animal's helplessness moves me and I put it out of its misery by folding the piece of paper together and sliding it between the pages of a book. Ada looks at me, Cass, Lilianne. Séraphine sweeps the hair out of her eyes the way she always does, with both hands from her parting to her chin. The school bell rings and we race outside before everyone else. In the shade of the streets it is still cool, it is only when we get to the village square that the heat suddenly hits us and we stop dead, dazzled for an instant by the sunlight on the white paving stones.

This is our village, we have no other.

And so, one after another, we approach the wall and, with solemn ceremony, turn back over the stones which the goat disturbed.

The wall runs for fifty metres along the eastern edge of the village square. It was built many years ago by the men of the village who assembled in the square early one morning, their faces still grey from the night, grey faces in the grey light of dawn. The men are standing around together, smoking in silence. Slender threads of smoke rise before their faces, they peer about, waiting for the off, which eventually happens all by itself when one of them stretches and makes a noise and leads the way, then a second, a third, a thin thread chain, a thread of smoke, winding its way up into the mountains. There are no women amongst them. The



work will be hard, the stones are heavy, the women have wrapped bread and cheese and sausage in cloth, there is goat's milk in a can, schnapps in a thick glass bottle. The men head northwards. They know the way. They see nothing around them, hear nothing to trouble them. Their familiarity with the way deadens their senses, they do not smell the wild herbs, do not feel the sun rising beside them, do not taste anything other than their mouths as they always taste every morning, stale after waking, like the mouth of a dog. The path is narrow, not wide enough to walk two abreast. Hoofprints of mountain goats on the path. To the right, the mountain falls away sharply, a scree down to the water, but the men do not hear the roar of the river into which the mountain goats fall when they lose their footing and plummet down the slope. The river sweeps the goats away with it down into the valley, their corpses wash up in an inlet like horned, hairy whales. The men do not hear the roar, do not feel the heat rising at their backs. They continue to walk in single file, each still lost in his own thoughts, thoughts of the harvest and the herd, of the man in front's wife, but something else does creep into their minds, the mentality of a band of labourers – we are going to build a wall. We are one body with fifty hands. The wall must be built before the autumn rain washes the earth down the mountain slope. One body with fifty hands, with fifty legs firmly rooted in the ground. The men do not feel the path getting steeper now. Sweat patches on their shirts form dark triangles that resemble shields being carried on their backs. The mouths of the mules bringing up the rear of the procession are hanging wide open. With a steadfast stoicism, they set down their hooves on the endless path which weaves this way and that up the mountain before suddenly dropping down steeply just short of the summit and twisting and turning its way between wedged-together slabs of granite. At the crest of the path, the men pause for a moment. Below them lies the limestone quarry, a gaping white wound cut into the sheer rock wall facing them. Their journey is almost at an end now. They move off again at a leisurely pace, take one more deep breath before getting down to the task which will take everything they have got – the wall which they are going to build with fifty arms, fifty hands. You three tie up the mules. The two of you go over to the quarry face. You hand out the hammers and chisels. The men get down on their knees and hammer out the stones. The time for talking is over. The sounds of hammer blows bounce around the quarry, the mules are standing side by side, nostrils flared as they breathe in the stinging, limestone dust-laden air, their ears twitching to the rhythm of the hammer blows,



otherwise nothing stirs, the sun hangs directly over the quarry and beats down as if in punishment.

To the rhythm of the hammer blows.

The men pile the stones behind them, ten other men form a chain and pass the stones along, others load them into sacks, still others drive the mules back down into the village. The village is poor, it only has five pack animals. The journey has to be made several times, twice more than very day. Those left behind sit in the shade of the quarry face and drink the milk, eat the bread, the cheese, the sausage, drink the schnapps, pass the bottle around in silence, leave some over for the mule drivers. The men's faces are caked in dust, their mouths are caked in dust until the milk wets their lips, or the schnapps. In the shade, their thoughts come flooding back – the harvest, the herd, the man in front's wife. The cool bedsheet on bare skin. They are already tired, already after this first stint. You lot – take the hammers and chisels and hammer out the stones. Slowly, the sun moves across the quarry. The mules return, the mule drivers polish off the schnapps, eat the bread, the cheese, the sausage. The hammer blows grow weaker. The mules set off and return again. It all has to be done before dusk falls. The fiery ball of the sun comes to rest on the mountain top. The men pack away the hammers and chisels and load up the mules one last time. They know the way, they see nothing around them, hear nothing to trouble them. Weariness deadens their senses and the men drift apart from each other, float off into the air, each in his own shimmering bubble blown about in all directions by the rising wind, over the radiant red mountainsides and jagged silhouettes of the summit, dream bubbles in which the men rotate around their own axis, weightless and with eyes wide open, evening embryos in the warm light of the setting sun. They are a little too sluggish, a little late. In the gloom, a mule loses its footing and plunges over the edge of the scree, the animal does not utter a sound, a silent, startled shock, its legs flounder helplessly on the rubble while its body, weighed down by stones, slowly slides down the slope, eyes goggling a final farewell. The animal slips into the river as if in a dream. The weight of the stones drags it straight down, the churned-up surface of the water already settling when suddenly the animal rears its head back out of the water and, in one last desperate attempt, lets out a wail, a wail now after all, a high-pitched wail directed up to the sky which pierces the delicate membranes of the bubbles with ease and bursts them, bringing the men crashing down to earth, down to the edge of the scree, their eyes searching the



dark water below. The mule is gone. The men walk on in silence. Just around the next bend, the lights of the village are waiting, the women and children are waiting, looking upwards to catch sight of the men. A thread of smoke, a thin thread chain now one link short, coming back down from the mountains. Even before the men reach the village, the women go back inside their houses. It is enough to know that the men are coming home, food can now be put onto the table, bread, schnapps. Outside, the children run to meet their fathers, one girl counts the mules – one fewer. The village has four pack animals left. The girl lays a hand on the nostrils of the animals, which are trembling from the strain, whispers something to them, some little words of comfort or of cruelty – there are only four of you now. The men unstrap the sacks from the backs of the mules and lay down the stones at the foot of the mountain slope. It is their last job of the day. Early the next morning, they will get up and sort the stones, will dig a trench one shovel blade deep and re-fill a third of it with sand, will mark out a line parallel to the slope with string and lay the largest stones at a slight angle to the slope, will fill the spaces in-between with loamy sand and stack the next course with staggered joints, will tap down each stone securely with a hammer and backfill with sand after each course, will place every tenth stone at right angles to the direction of the wall to form a dovetail with the slope. The men are going to build a wall. The wall has cost a life and two days' work and it will protect the village from the slope when the rain comes.

The rain comes and we jump down from the wall where we have been sitting and run over to the large chestnut tree in the middle of the village square. A wooden bench runs around the trunk of the tree, we sit so that we can look out in all directions, sit on the backrest and lean against the trunk. Ada looks out towards the wall and the slope which rises up behind it. Cass looks out towards the lopsided white houses and the road which winds its way up into the mountains. Lilianne looks out towards the railway station and the big clock with its Roman numerals. Séraphine looks out towards the railway tracks which lead down into the valley and sweeps the hair out of her eyes. I look out towards the sloping meadows, the multi-coloured flowers, red and blue and yellow, the goats grazing on the flowers and the grass. There is not much more than that. The slope. The road. The clock. The railway tracks. We have lived here since the day we were born. In winter the slope is sealed under a blanket of snow, in spring the mud



slides down the road, in summer the railway tracks sparkle like two bands of gold and the clock strikes in autumn on the morning of the harvest festival. We pick flowers from the meadow and plait them together into flower chains. We fashion sledges from straw and wood and slide down the slope on them. We balance on the railway tracks until our feet burn and the village disappears behind us. The clock has struck every hour since the day we were born. The road is deserted. The rain drums down onto the leaves of the chestnut tree, high above our heads, far away. But we stay as dry as if we were inside. I close my eyes and imagine the bench beginning to turn, slow and juddering at first, like a rusty children's merry-go-round, the fairground music a tinny, overwound jangle, then faster and faster, I quickly open my eyes again, the colours blur, the dark slope smudges over into the whiteness of the houses, delicate dabs of red-blue-yellow petals, distended goats, goats as long as the railway tracks, the bands of gold a planetary ring. Ada is the first to leave. She kisses us on the cheeks, her lips are soft like pillows, her father works in the quarry just like everyone else's here, her mother is all shrivelled up after four children. Ada sleeps with her three siblings in a large room whose floor is permanently caked in the limestone dust which her father brings home with him. Her mother is caked in limestone dust. A chalky-white woman with dry lips, she no longer has any love left to give Ada, she needs it all for herself, the last drop of water that stops her dying of thirst. Ada walks through the rain with her head held high, almost haughtily. She is the strongest of us all, is second to none when it comes to knocking over the goats. Where we need two hands to turn over the stones, Ada uses two fingers. She loves running these fingers through Lilianne's hair, Lilianne's long black shiny hair which she always offers to us, though only Ada ever shows any interest in it, strokes it, kisses it, runs her long fingers through it, the same fingers which grasp and pick up the stones like a pair of tongs. Lilianne jumps down from the bench and runs after Ada. She will get into trouble with her father for getting her schoolbooks wet after holding them in one hand over her head to protect her hair from the rain. She will hide the books from her father and her father will ask her where the books are. Lilianne will make up some story or other to avoid having to take the blame, but her father will not believe her. They will go down into the cellar. Lilianne will sit facing the wall and her father will stand behind her. Neither of them will move for hours. Then her father will ask again where her books are and Lilianne will tell him. The pages of the books will be rippled and covered in water



stains. Her father will caress the books ruefully and leave Lilianne sitting in the cellar until well into the small hours. Lilianne will tell Ada all about it while Ada runs her long fingers through Lilianne's hair. They walk through the rain hand-in-hand, just to torment Cass a little. Cass's jealousy – she tries to hold it in, but it gnaws its way out and reveals itself on her face. At night, she grinds her teeth, in the morning she spits a chalky sludge out into the washbasin, just like her father does when he returns home from the quarry. It is wearing down her teeth and she can no longer chew properly. This is why Cass cuts up her food into tiny little pieces which she can chew to a pulp and gulp down. She is jealous of everything and everyone, perhaps because she herself has nothing. There are some days when she keeps the pulp longer inside her mouth, until the evening, packing it under her top and bottom lips with her tongue, stuffing her cheeks with it until she looks like a hamster. Then she lies down in bed and, eyes closed, takes pleasure in letting the pulp melt over her tongue even though any taste it had is long since gone, falls asleep while it is happening and dreams of a land of plenty where food flies into her mouth. The pulp dries at the corners of her mouth, the following morning she is back to having nothing. Cass jumps down from the bench and runs after Ada and Lilianne. The rain has eased off, the drumming gets quieter until it finally fades away completely. Séraphine looks out towards the railway tracks and sweeps the hair out of her eyes. Poor, stupid, little Séraphine. She has cocked her head to one side and I would like to believe that she is thinking about the railway tracks, about whether they lead to the sea or to some big, glittering city, or whether they run on forever, through all the days and nights, to the end of the world. Séraphine's eyes are two shallow pools of watery blue shrouded in a light mist. Those eyes are quick to succumb to sleep. Séraphine blinks and climbs down from the bench and takes three steps towards the railway tracks before turning on her heel and wandering slowly after Ada, Lilianne and Cass, who have disappeared around the bend at the end of the road.

I am alone.

I do not want to go home, where my father is. Above the slope, the sun breaks through the clouds, the wet road explodes in the sudden blaze of light, the clock strikes the hour. The slope. The road. The clock. The railway tracks lead to the end of the world. I close my eyes, and the merry-go-round begins to turn, the faces blur, the bodies of the goats distend, never-ending charcoal-grey flanks between the golden bands of the railway tracks. I quickly open my eyes again and



the world stands still. Before me, the goat steps out of the inn by the station. He crosses the village square, his figure leaning over slightly to the left even though he does not have the suitcase with him. He looks about and I shrink back, remain perfectly still on the bench, like a bird watching and waiting in the gloom, until the goat turns away and, after a moment's hesitation, disappears along the road leading up into the mountains.