

Ariana Harwicz

Translated by Sarah Moses & Carolina Orloff

Now I'm speaking as him. As him, I think of her and my mouth goes dry. I don't know what she's doing lying on her back in the thick, light grass, tossed aside like a piece of junk. She's wearing the same shirt she had on yesterday. Pink, sleeveless. The same black trousers she had on last week. He sees everything: I recognise every piece of clothing in her wardrobe by now, he says to himself. She has wellies on even though it's not raining. She wears flared skirts to give herself curves, but they disappear as soon as she puts on denim shorts. She ties her hair up in a tight bun like an imitation classical ballerina about to walk on stage. I know her positions off by heart. She sits hunched over, her head hanging between her legs. Or she lies down, like now, as if someone's just dumped her there and forgotten about her. She eats with her hands, straight from the pan, but only when she's alone. She winds handkerchiefs around her neck like a Burmese woman does metal coils. Her bra straps show. I can't smell her and I can't tell if she's breathing heavily. I don't know what it feels like to touch her back. I'm missing the details. The closest I came was the time I drove my motorcycle up to her front gate, but the sound of the engine scared her and I had to drive off. Did she look at me? Does she ever think about me? Her eyes are what intrigue me most, not knowing exactly what colour they are. I'd say they're grey, but sometimes they seem closer to the colour of hay. What would it be like to have her eyes fixed on mine? I know she has broad shoulders and her fingers are slender. I know she almost never laughs, that she walks with such large strides it's as though she's marching in a military parade. She doesn't smoke. Or at least I've never seen her smoke. She doesn't listen to music, at least not in the late evening just before nightfall when I stop by after work, my mouth already dry half an hour before I mount my motorcycle and put on my helmet. Half an hour before knowing that I'll see her sitting on the swing with her baby, blonde like her. Frail and long. Throwing him up into the air and grabbing him clumsily on the way down. Though once she missed. I'll see her cry, see her fury in the way she holds her mouth. I don't know her name or her age. I don't know anything at all. I

heard her singing opera in a deep baroque voice once and it's obvious she wasn't born here, but where was she born, and when? If someone had told me this story at work, I wouldn't have believed it. A man like me. The person in charge of the X-ray department at the city's health clinic. A radiologist who graduated from the public university, class of '83. Married with a daughter who's different, who has special needs. An easy-going guy, a man of the house. Born and raised in the city closest to here. Born and raised in the city closest to here. A man who spent all his childhood and teenage years in the same flat in the same region in the centre of the country. Spellbound by a woman who wears flared skirts and spends her afternoons sprawled out like an amphibian on her lawn. I see her for as long as the slowest speed of my motorcycle allows. Those few fatal seconds. I think about her and heave with desire. A man like me, not particularly good, but not the devil either. A man like me who enjoys running his fingers through his wife's soft hair, who makes love to her slowly, respecting her moods and her menstrual cycle, and only when our little girl's asleep. A sharp, fun guy who doesn't overcomplicate things. And now the hazard lights are on and I've pulled up on the side of the road. I'm hounded by this dryness in my mouth, knowing that on my way home I'll pass her front gate and see her there among the flowers. Those images that will then last the ten miles separating her from my house. Furious images stuck to my palate. Her among the thorns, a dream-like orange vision, and me a crazy fox on the roadside. The farms and animal pens pass by, first I hear clucking and then I see the chicken coop. The same people as always say hello with their hands in the earth or on a cow's udders or holding some shears up in a tree. This familiar setting with its farm equipment, cow dung, poultry houses and hunting dogs is spoilt by the image I drag home with me like a piece of rubbish. The image that grows inside me, causing chaos. The horror of this desire. Wanting to skin, to flay, to escape what pursues me. I wave to my beautiful wife who's pulling up weeds with her garden gloves, but the image continues to follow me when I park and go inside. An aura expanding. My tree, insipid and leafless, becomes voluptuous. And she's with me when I hold my daughter in my arms. Even when I put food in her little mouth and bathe her. And beyond. Far beyond. Today at dawn I cried for her on the kitchen floor, pounding the tiles with my fists and longing to have her finger bones, her hips, the flesh of her buttocks here with me. I fooled myself believing this was the lowest I could go. An image poisons you: the eyes of an owl, and just like that, it's too late. I push her up against the wall, undo her bun with my teeth and strangle her with my kisses.

[...]

I use my sleeping husband's hand to touch myself. He's not looking at me, he's dreaming. He uses my dead hand to touch himself. I'm not looking at him, I'm

asleep. We're in separate bedrooms, on separate mattresses. There's been a mistake. We're not meant to be one. No one wants to be a Siamese twin, to have their organs stuck to someone else's. He smiles while he dreams. I don't make him smile. I swear at him. I punch him, on the shoulder, in the face. He's had it up to here with me and vice versa. We're too much for each other but we carry on. I give him the finger, fuck you, as soon as I get up. Morning, what do you want for breakfast? My outstretched finger in his face. I'd love to break his teeth. The restless child is singing softly between his mum and dad. Who do you love more? asks his Dad, about to explode any second. Is it so difficult for him to say how was your day yesterday? Apparently it is. How was your day yesterday? I ask myself, and answer, fine thanks. I proceed to tell myself about my day, chatting away. I leave the table and he eats my croissant and finishes my coffee. He lets me go, obviously, but then he regrets it and bursts out, You're evil, leading me into the pastures where the vegetation is taller than us. He doesn't give in. He makes me walk blindly, the grasses hitting me in the face like thistles, like the bones of a skeleton. Then he decides to take advantage of the situation and presses himself up against me, but it doesn't go anywhere, and he pushes me further in. I start to speak, I don't know what words come out of my mouth but I keep them coming and he tells me, When you speak it's like the car alarm, it goes on and on, it's unbearable. So I carry on speaking, and now I'm shouting, though I don't know when I raised my voice. Can't you speak without shouting? Can't you give the verbal diarrhoea a rest? He doesn't understand that I can't. Control yourself, he says, I don't understand a thing when you speak non-stop. Why don't you take a pronunciation course? Why don't you do a language exchange with a local? We stop somewhere. Now what? But when I go to say something he snaps at me and walks a few feet away to where I can't see him. I press my fists into my eye sockets. It hurts. What's the point of crying? I'm a startled deer, a sad, sensitive deer. A cool breeze picks up. He doesn't come back to me, but he hasn't left either. I'm just another patch of grass. Nothing happens until suddenly we hear grunts and mooing. I run around in circles and end up on the streaked tarmac. He's there too, watching the show. The cows have been separated from their calves, when just a second ago they were all grazing together quietly, stuffing their faces. These bovine mothers are causing a massive scene, mooing so loudly they grow hoarse, doing everything they can to resist. But their babies get taken away just the same. See you later, calves, I say, waving goodbye. Bon voyage. The cows are still there by the side of the road, stunned. The vultures arrive in time for lunch with their collars of feathers, holding their cutlery and napkins. We go home together, arms around each other. We love each other so much. We sing a catchy little ditty, *why oh why, tell me why could it be, that when a cow's tied up, her calf won't leave. Someone else's misfortune is a swift kick from a horse.*

Christine Brooke-Rose

A fly straddles another fly on the faded denim stretched over the knee. Sooner or later, the knee will have to make a move, but now it is immobilised by the two flies, the lower of which is so still that it seems dead. The fly on top is on the contrary quite agitated, jerking tremulously, then convulsively, putting out its left foreleg to whip, or maybe to stroke some sort of reaction out of the fly beneath, which, however, remains so still that it seems dead. A microscope might perhaps reveal animal ecstasy in its innumerable eyes, but only to the human mind behind the microscope, and besides, the fetching and rigging up of a microscope, if one were available, would interrupt the flies. Sooner or later some such interruption will be inevitable; there will be an itch to scratch or a nervous movement to make or even a bladder to go and empty. But now there is only immobility. The fly on top is now perfectly still also. Sooner or later some interruption will be necessary, a bowl of gruel to be eaten, for instance, or a conversation to undergo. Sooner or later a bowl of gruel will be brought, unless perhaps it has already been brought, and the time has come to go and get rid of it, in which case—

— Would you rather have your gruel now or when I come back from Mrs. Mgulu?

That question is inevitable, but will not necessarily occur in that precise form.

— Two flies are making love on my knee.

— Flies don't make love. They have sexual intercourse.

— On the contrary.

— You mean they make love but don't have sexual intercourse?

— I mean it's human beings who have sexual intercourse but don't make love.

— Very witty. But you are talking to yourself. This dialogue will not necessarily occur.

The straddled fly stretches out its forelegs and rubs them together, but the fly in top is perfectly still. Soon the itch will have to be scratched.

— Hello, is there anyone there? It's Mrs. Tom.

— Who is it? Oh, hello, Mrs. Tom, did you get my message?