

Erosion

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Stones, like us, stand at the intersection of countless lines crossing one another and receding to infinity, at the center of a field of forces too unpredictable to be measured; and we awkwardly call the result chance, hazard, or fate.

Marguerite Yourcenar in Oeuvres, Roger Caillois¹

¹ Quote translated by Barbara Bray in the book *The Writing of Stones* by Roger Caillois, with an introduction by Marguerite Yourcenar

1

It's not that I don't speak here, Alma.

Although I may not have uttered a word to anyone for days – in my mind I'm talking, constantly, to myself, to you.

While walking this endless beach, I occasionally burst into song. I can't help it. I'm startled by my own voice, reassured – that I'm still full of life – you know, this is a place of deep-deep breathing, singing at the top of my lungs, for the sea

Heeeey-oooh-eeey

before glancing around, afraid someone's spying on me.

Don't look at me, kssh, go away, stop watching me, stop it.

No, it's not that I don't speak here.

But there's nobody left on these beaches.

Don't ask me how I ended up here – I was staring at a map, looking for the tiniest place, without escape routes, without noise, a place with edges, where nobody knows me, where I would have a horizon. I boarded the ferry, among a cluster of people with good shoes, good socks, good shorts, white caps, thinning hair. As we set off, 'Forever Young' by Alphaville was playing through the speakers.

°O

Blue jellyfish. Mussels. Mussels. Yet more mussels. Eight crabs within a three-metre radius. Flamingo-pink flesh. I pick them up and put them down again, and as the water washes over them, I see them thrashing about.

°

Do you remember how we talked about creating something, something meaningful, and then having no recollection afterwards of how you got there, how you did it. That's how I ended up here – no no I'm not making anything here, nothing meaningful. But since you made your decision to disappear to tear yourself away to eradicate me what verb should I in-god's-god's

Heeeey-oooh-eeey since you made your decision, Alma, this has troubled me a lot. I go places, I do things, but can't remember how I got there, how exactly I did it, what brings you here, why are you holding this right now, why this person why without you.

°O

I told the doctor about my dreams. I told the doctor about my wakeful hours. I told her about my compulsion to lie in the grass, sometimes for hours on end. I told her about the sinking feeling, the fever. I told her about the pounding, the engulfing, the shallow breathing. I told her the daylight hours are stuck in sleep mode. The doctor pressed on my diaphragm. She told me to keep a sense of perspective.

.°Oo

It's not that I don't speak here. I think and write, every day. Not only no not only in the sand but – is this even a story I want to hold on to? Alma? Is it mine, is it our story?

At least there's a landscape.

At least there's a landscape I could look at from the ferry railing. Broad sandbanks, half-submerged land, blue-blue-deep-dark-sea. As we sailed, a large ferry with just three people on deck passed us, from the island to the mainland. The three people on board waved. From our boat, fourteen calm arms waved back.

Heeeey-oooh o ..°0 00

You wouldn't understand this place.

You would be annoyed by the wind, by the fact that it isn't quite warm enough even though you're pouring with sweat, by the sea that's not quite comfortable enough to swim in; nothing here is welcoming.

At first everybody stared at me. Obviously. Small, sinewy, windswept woman, all by herself, crouching, peering at the tideline. Shovel, bright orange bucket. Pale face, dark bags, buzz cut; who'd guess I'm pushing forty.

At first nobody asked me any questions. I don't speak their language. I speak with my hands, eyes, back. I mumble, stop looking, away go away go away go go go ks ks kssh bird kssh.

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2.

His name is Kaspar, they said. Stained fingertips between the bars of the birdcage, shoving, whispering, long tail feathers with a turquoise sheen between his green feathers, shimmering in the classroom's fluorescent light. Kaspar. You took a deep breath as you said his name. I looked at the red circles around his beady eyes, a white circle, a blue one, straight into his black pupils, across his head until my gaze reached yours, you staring right back from the other side, the cherry-red, downward pointing bill, the thin black line around his neck, the horizontal, even finer line connecting the eyes and the bill, giving the bird a serious frown. Kaspar, I repeated while pressing my lips together, Kaspar. The bird sat on the perch inside its cage, frozen with fear.

We took our newly allocated seats: you next to me at a desk in the back row. We were told to draw the bird. The tip of my tongue poked out of my mouth, your elbow touched mine, you were breathing heavily, everybody was quiet. It was the first Monday of the school year and our pencils were sharpened and our erasers not yet lost. The teacher slowly paced among our desks. I didn't know you; you were new.

Alma, you said. That's my name. Alma, I repeated. I'm Helle. I was aware of your eyes on my drawing, back to yours, on my fingers, you blatantly looking at me from head to toe, and when I raised my head your black eyebrow shot up, the first time you turned your unforgiving gaze on me. Your lips parted but you said nothing, you just turned back to your own sheet. You'd casually committed the bird to paper with a few quick strokes, around it the rough outline of a long, flat triangle. I returned to my sheet, my thoughts, totally absorbed, and didn't hear you get up and, like the other children, make your way to the playground. At the end of the day my drawing was left on the blackboard, and I was the first who got to take Kaspar home.

My mother had placed the cage in the corner of the living room, right by the window. After I came home she spent a long time staring at the bird, all the while rubbing her lips together. Eventually, Frank put his hand on her shoulder and said it was good for me to learn to look after something. There was a jar of peanuts next to the cage that I was allowed to dip into once a day. I carefully put the nuts inside the cage, one at a time, and watched the bird crack them open and gobble up the contents with quick, precise pecks. That night, when my mother and Frank were asleep, I slipped out of bed and headed downstairs. I sat on the chair beside the cage and looked the creature straight in the eyes. I could hear my own breathing, and the chill in the nocturnal house gave me a weird sense of exhilaration. The bird returned my gaze. I reached my fingers inside the cage and tried to touch the feathers. Then I started talking, softly, about the house he was staying at, about the people living there, about myself in the third person. She's quiet but good at drawing, I said. That's why you're here now. She's lucky to have you. She loves you very much.

In the morning my mother failed to notice that the chair beside the cage had been moved, that I'd forgotten to take my blanket back to bed.

The hours in class passed slowly. I spent every day looking forward to going home and seeing Kaspar again. On day one, my classmates all crowded around me in the playground and asked how the bird was doing, and I felt nervous as I told them everything, but they soon forgot Kaspar even existed and their time was once again filled with yelling, running, pushing and shoving, and I found myself sitting on the same old bench as last year, watching them while I nibbled at the discoloured, peeled apple slices Frank had packed for me.

I saw you walking around the playground, always surrounded by a pack of children, keeping you company, asking you questions, wanting to share their sweets with you, the mysterious new arrival, while you held your head up high and peered past them, over them, as if you'd seen it all before, as if you were scanning the horizon for something else, someone else, and when you walked past me you looked me up and down and back up again. You didn't say much to me, but you kept an eye on me: you looked at how I wrote and drew, opened my exercise book without asking, stuck your hand in my bag, and the next day, for the first time, you spent the entire break sitting on the bench beside me.

Meanwhile I would slip out of bed every night to sit beside Kaspar. The second night I discovered he liked bread. The third night I wrapped my arms around the cage and lifted the bird up. I walked around the house, placing the cage on the sofa, on the kitchen table, in the sitting room which was full of old stuff and unpacked boxes. I told him everything I knew. I sang songs for Kaspar, pulled open the kitchen cabinets in search of other treats to feed him: I tried apple, crisps, chocolate. The fourth night I gazed into the bird's eyes for a long time and felt him looking back, at me, and when I caressed his tiny neck he nodded gently.

On the fifth day the bird had to be returned to school. With the cage in my hands, I carefully walked the quieter streets of the housing estate until I reached the school playground. There a teacher took the cage out of my hands and carried Kaspar back to the classroom. The results of an arithmetic test determined where the bird went the following week. He was going with Willem, a lanky brute of a boy with freckles who lived on a dog breeding farm. I spent the rest of that day looking at the cage with a pit in my stomach. I was quiet. You never said a word to me either and during the break you didn't sit next to me.

When we walked back into the classroom afterwards for our final lesson of the day, the cage was empty. The little door was open, Kaspar nowhere to be seen. Our teacher's face was pale, his mouth a hard, horizontal line. We weren't allowed to leave the room until we confessed to freeing the bird. But nobody owned up to it, nobody knew anything, and a few children started sobbing while parents waited impatiently at the school gate, and when eventually twilight fell outside the teacher had no choice but to let us go.

As I sauntered home I glanced over my shoulder. There you were, walking in the same direction as me. You picked up your pace until you were beside me. We walked home without a word, my shoulder against your upper arm – you were a head taller even then. I knew that you'd freed Kaspar during playtime. You knew that I knew. We didn't say anything. When you had to turn left and I straight on, you calmly said, see you Monday, Helle. The way you said my name. Okay, I said, and waved. I knew that from now on life would be interesting. I knew that from now on I had a girlfriend.
