

The Animals Within

Translation handcrafted without any use of generative AI

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An extract

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The First Gate

Dramatis personae

She, the woman wearing my clothes.

Me, the residual human.

The animals, chorus.

When I gently push open the door a chink, I see her standing in the kitchen. A woman of around thirty, in stockinged feet. Her hair is the same length as mine. She's wearing a denim skirt and the green sweater I lost a few months ago. She's standing with her back to the door, opening cupboards and drawers, finding what she's looking for with ease. She makes a cup of tea and hums. I recognise the song and let go of the doorhandle. I hear you waking up in the bedroom. You cry and I stiffen. I can't do this. Not now. Not anymore. My whole body knows it. I stand stock still in the doorway and watch. The woman goes to the bedroom and returns with you held peacefully to her chest. She's talking quietly to you. I look at her, I watch how she heads towards Hannes through the room with you. From his chair at the kitchen table he asks whether you had a wet nappy. She replies, just a regular one. You don't move. She takes care of everything. I take a step back, into the hall, turn around and go down the stairs and outside. It's August 2021 and unusually cold for the time of the year. That was the day she started being able to sleep again. That was the day the world regained its measure, its days and nights, its seasons. But that's not the whole story. For me it was just the start.

I never returned home again. I wander and roam. I have no name. I can smell the animals. They're everywhere in this city. They know everything. I can hear them.

Since that day in August, I've been trailing my silence behind me, like a dragnet along the bottom of my soul, but I can't find the answers. There's one question I've kept asking all this time. Despite all the mulling, mockery, reticence and self-contempt. Who is the woman wearing my clothes and rocking my child? She sings the lullaby of a thousand mothers – mine too – like a swarm of bees. Is that her or is it me?

They say that when I do speak, my voice sounds like paper tearing.

Sweet child, I saw you come to life in language. I saw how you slowly connected words to things. You can bite into an – Apple. You can suck on a – Dummy. A great big smile as you stretch your arms out towards me – Mummy. Now that I'm searching for words myself – words for this thing, this glob, this misshapen lump inside me – now I want to speak, language flees. I'm helpless again, outside of speech, like a newborn. It's not that there aren't any words to use – others have written down our story in sterile clinical terms – but it feels like I'm at the mercy of a misplaced transparency. Misplaced because those words, in all their sobriety and prosaicness, offer no grip on what we actually went through. Then better the stories I read, the allegories in which people descend into hell, their eyes open. A hell. Their hell. One story in particular keeps sticking in my mind: the story of Inanna, who travelled to the underworld in search of a woman she was very close to but from whom she had nevertheless become separated.

I was sixteen and I read not to feel my own body. I read obsessively, the great myths, heroes, gods, the beginning of time. I tugged creation from dead language. A pink-fingered dawn. A polyphonic whispering sea. A world in which no one ever lay crying on the basement floor of a house in the suburb of a university town.

I was thirty and I stood in front of my bookcase every evening, too tired to read. I worked on the nineteenth floor of an office block. During the day I was a lawyer

and I negotiated contracts, in the evenings I stared at my bookcase. I came home in the dark, summer and wintertime too. I came home, freed my body from the stiff fabric of my skirt suit, and ran my finger along the broken spines on the shelves. They contained everything I could remember at that time of who I was.

Sweet child, as I try to find words for this maternal grief of mine, I find those words most easily outside of myself. I recognise the topography of a landscape in other people's stories, no more than abstract lines on an ordnance survey map. But they point to a path along which we too can begin our descent. Here and there a stacked-up pile of rocks, a tangible reminder of other hands and other feet that once sought a way through this land.

I once read a story about people in Japan who don't leave their bedrooms for years. Often they are men. They are called hikiko mori. It means they turn inwards, away from the world. To me, the word carries the sound of some kind of swaddling, even though I don't understand Japanese. I imagine such a man folding in the four walls of his room around himself like an origami box. He sits in that box with his eyes almost closed, and behind his eyelids he weaves a rice-paper screen. He stays inside. At most, he slips out of his room in the dead of night to go to the supermarket. This is possible in a city of neon, where people have done away with night and thus with peace, but not with loneliness. In Tokyo, the restaurants are full every night. If you look closely, you will see that almost all the tables are occupied by men in suits and ties who eat alone in silence.

The light above their tables is white, a shadowless white, a white they have to endure. Sometimes, a man stops appearing at his regular table. That's how it begins. Someone trading the light for twilight. No one knows how many hikiko mori there are. They don't belong anywhere, they do nothing, they hide and they kill time. They play games on their phones as if they were in a waiting room. It has something to do with shame, with something that needs to be covered up. They lose their jobs or their wives or simply their grip on their lives, and they disappear. Worse than the defeat is the visible defeat. I read about a boy from Hiroshima who

has been living indoors for seven years because he couldn't decide what to do with his life. He chose something, then chose something else and a little later something else again. When he no longer knew what else to choose, he hid. He needed time. He needed to think. In the beginning, the phone would ring, or someone would lift the flap of his letterbox to peek inside.

One time, the police came round. After a while, he not only withdrew from the world, but the world withdrew from him. The longer he waited, the emptier his head became. As soon as it was stirred by his thoughts every possibility was crushed. Do you know Zeno's paradox? I've known the story for years, but it is only now that I really understand it. Achilles wants to chase a turtle. He is faster than the turtle, but he is told he will never catch up with because the distance he has to cover can be divided into two each time. Achilles must first cover half the distance, and then half the remaining distance, and so on. One half will always remain. Convinced by this reasoning, Achilles gives up even before the race begins.

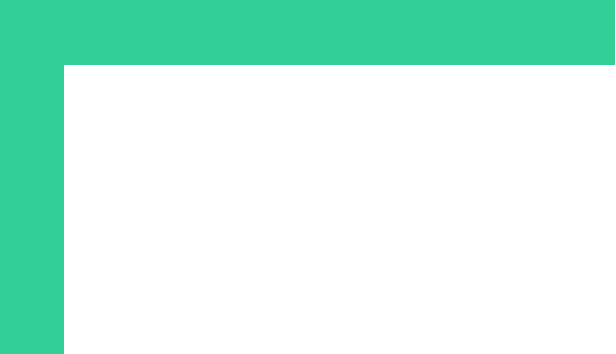
What separates Achilles from the tortoise is the same thing that separates hikiko mori from life. For both, inward movement is the most dangerous, the most irreversible of all movements: it inexorably leads to stasis. When I left the stage, I wasn't aware of this danger. I didn't know that you can lose the slit in the curtain through which you slip. I didn't know that you can get lost in the wings of your own life for the rest of your days. Yet I'm beginning to suspect that that is where I ended up – ever since that day in August 2021 when I turned around, walked down the stairs and out of the front door. In that moment, I let go of something I didn't want to lose, something essential that, I believe I can only recapture by retracing my steps. As a child, I sometimes got stuck in a jumper. After I'd taken my arms out of the sleeves and pulled the fabric inside out over my head, I couldn't get the jumper off, as if my head had suddenly stopped fitting through the neck opening.

During those moments, the world was invisible, and in the sweltering heat beneath the fabric, a vague panic would set in. I would try to wriggle out of the jumper, sweating slightly from the fear of staying stuck. If you were to ask me what kind of place I ended up in, I might say that I'm stuck in a jumper

now too. It's my jumper, I chose it myself. I thought it would fit me, but as soon as I stuck my head through the neck hole, I ran into another body in the dark. It was the body of the woman in the kitchen. She's been in my way ever since. She takes up so much space I can't fit into my own jumper, but when I want to take it off, she stops me. She is stronger than me, primal and potent. In the darkness of our wool cocoon, I can hear her heart pounding. It beats and beats. When it comes to how I ended up here, in this phantom place, I get caught up in a tangle of narratives. Ariadne's thread that should lead here is a ball of loose ends, of wool still hanging unspun from the sheep, of tangles and knots. Yet I sense it is the path I must take, that I must show you the way I have lost myself. We have to go back to 2021, from your birth all the way to that crucial moment in the doorway. Promise me you'll pay close attention. If you feel suspicious, if you feel yourself getting scared or sad, stop reading. I cannot help you where I am.

When Inanna went to enter the underworld, the gatekeeper asked her at the first gate: 'Why does your heart lead you down the road from which no traveller ever returns?' She could have said that it wasn't a choice, that she'd been summoned from the darkness.

All those months of being pregnant hadn't prepared me. I'd decorated a bedroom, picked out clothes, washed and even ironed them. The admin was sorted. I'd lain awake over silly things. But all that time when I had supposedly been able to get used to the idea, nothing had changed inside me. I couldn't see beyond childbirth, that moment that both fascinated and terrified me. Somehow, I'd expected childbirth to be a horizon you had to cross to see the land beyond. I hadn't thought it was a cliff you could tumble off into the depths. My insomnia during those months of pregnancy was a harbinger of what was to come, but I didn't have a clue. I waited patiently, curious about what would unfold, always from afar, as if I were a spectator, as if this story wouldn't be shaped from my own flesh. 'Unfathomable,' they say, 'hard to grasp.' There's a reason for that reference to hands, to touch. I always assumed that as soon as you were born, as soon as you entered the world of the tangible, I'd



know what I was dealing with. Before your birth, we were both living in a womb-like twilight zone. Then you were there and I still knew nothing, felt nothing. I understood even less than before. There was suddenly an extra layer of skin between us that had to be bridged anew.
