FLANDERS LITERATURE

While the Gods Were Sleeping

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I have always shrunk from the act of beginning. From the first word, the first touch. The restlessness when the first sentence has to be formed, and after the first the second. The restlessness and the excitement, as if you are pulling away the cloth beneath which a body rests: asleep or dead. There is also the desire, or the fantasy wish, to beat the pen into a ploughshare and plough a freshly written sheet clean again, across the lines, furrow after furrow. Then I would look back at a snow-white field, at the remnants the plough blade has churned up: buckets rusted through, strands of barbed wire, splinters of bone, bed rails, a dud shell, a wedding ring.

I'd give a lot to be able to descend into the subterranean heart of our stories, to be lowered on ropes into their dark shafts and see stratum after stratum glide by in the lamplight. Everything the earth has salvaged: foundations, fence rails, tree roots, soup plates, soldiers' helmets, the skeletons of animals and people in hushed chaos, the maelstrom congealed to a terrestrial crust that has swallowed us up.

I would call it the book of the shards, of the bones and the crumbs, of the lines of trees and the dead in the hole down to the cellar and the drinking bout at the long table. The book of mud, too, of the placenta, the morass and the matrix.

I am grateful to the world for still having window sills, and door frames, skirting boards, lintels and the consolation of tobacco, and black coffee and men's thighs, that's all. One fine day you're too old to carry yourself graveward hour after hour, to mutter the *Dies irae* in porches, on street corners or in squares for so many figures who have long since flaked away from you, decayed into a squelchy mess your toes sink into. As you get older you no longer see people around you, only moving ruins. Again and again the dead find back doors or kitchen windows through which to slip inside and haunt younger flesh with their convulsions. People are draughty creatures. We have memories to tame the dead until they hang as still in our neurons as foetuses strangled by the umbilical cord. I fold their fingers and close their eyes, and if they sometimes sit up under their sheets I know it's enzymes or acids strumming their tendons. Their true resurrection is elsewhere.

When I was young such daydreams invariably awakened my mother's irritation, if I was unwise enough to confide them to her. She cherished a sacred awe of limits and barriers. Freeing your imagination from the earth was considered a sign of a frivolous disposition. For her the most unforgivable thing a living person could inflict on the dead was to make them speak; they can't defend themselves against what you put into their mouths. In her eyes the coin that the Ancient Greeks put under the tongue of their dead, as the fare for the ferryman who was to transport them

to the far bank of the Styx, had a different purpose: it was hush money. If the dead had started chattering, they would immediately have choked on the coin. They have no right to speak, she said, which is why no one must be their mouthpiece.

I myself have my doubts, still. Everything that lives and breathes is driven by a fundamental inertia, and everything that is dead keeps its vanished opportunities to exist shut up in itself like a hidden shame.

She would be over 100 if she were still alive. Not that much older than me, and I do my best not to put anything in her mouth, not even a coin. For that matter I don't often think of death any more. He thinks quite enough of me. Every morning after brushing my teeth I run my tongue over them, proud I still have a full set, and read in Braille the grin of the Death's head in my flesh. That suffices as a memento mori. There are nights when sleep thrusts me up like a remnant from its depths, until I wake with the cold, pull the covers closer and wonder why an image that can sometimes be decades old imposes itself on me with such clarity that I wake up. It's never anything dramatic. It may be the sight of a room, a landscape, a look from someone I've known or an incident without much significance—such as that Sunday morning, a spring day in the 1940s, when I am standing with my daughter at my livingroom window, waiting for lunch. We are looking out at the front garden and the road, which are strewn with white dots. The wind is blowing them out of the tame chestnut trees on the far bank of the river across the water, making them swirl in miniature tornados over the road as if it were snowing. The silence in the streets that morning, the pale light, the Sunday boredom, the smell of soup and roast veal, and my daughter saying: "I thought it would rain any day."

Or I am back on the beach, the broad beach at low tide, near the promenade, in the first chill of autumn, one of those days when you can extract the last warmth from the wind. I took my husband and my brother out, or vice versa, to get some fresh air, rather than to be constantly breathing in that hospital smell. They are standing among the huts, out of the wind, in the sun, scarves round their necks, kepis on their heads, and around them the silver-white sand is sparkling. In a fit of humour they have pinned their medals on their pyjama tops and now they are giving each other a light, because I have brought cigarettes for them. They look pale, and frail, in that merciless light, fullfrontal September light. Only their cheeks are flushed, bright red.

The scene would have something closed off about it, be for ever self-contained, except that my husband, my future husband, suddenly looks me straight in the eye, from behind the fingers of my brother, who is shielding the flame of the match with his hand: amused, roguish, sharp—a pleasure in which I immediately recognize the intelligence. Meanwhile my brother is peeping intently at my husband. He is not so much scanning his profile as absorbing it with his look. I suddenly realize that we were married to the same man.

When I turn round I don't see my room, my legs wrapped in blankets, or the board with the pen and paper on my lap,but the beach, the wide beach at low tide: the wind whipping up the water in the tidal pools, the thin white line of the surf, the grey-green water, the underside of the clouds, a friendly emptiness that draws me to it.

"The angel of time carried me off," I say to Rachida, the carer, when she helps me out of bed in the morning. I say it to her to see her laugh. "You know the angel of time, don't you? It could be the angel of vengeance or the angel of victory. But it's also the angel of sleep and Dürer's *Melencolia*."

"Yes, Mrs Helena. Your angels are complicated."

I'm glad she laughs, always laughs. Every morning she comes in just as cheerfully, sits me up in bed and arranges the pillows behind my back. She doesn't cut my bread into fussy little chunks, like the harpy who sometimes replaces her and stays sitting on the edge of the bed while I have breakfast, puffing audibly with impatience, before getting up to run the bath and put out the towels—the telegraphy of her impatience with me and my old age.

I'm also glad that Rachida takes care with my body when she frees me from my nightdress, that with equal quantities of devotion and routine she pulls my bony arms from my sleeves, and subjects my head as gently as possible to its daily birth through the narrow neck of my vest, while the other one, that pillar of salt, always manages to molest me with my own limbs. She hugs me to her like a lay figure and drags me across the floor to the bathroom to put me on the toilet. While I sit there until I've finished dripping she shakes up the sheets, pulls upthe blinds and yanks the clothes hangers in the wardrobe as if she's plundering the treasures of Rome. From the scourge of the Norsemen deliver us, O Lord.

"Her name is Christine," says Rachida, and though she looks grave, she laughs.

Most images that visit me when I am half asleep are old, but clear as a mirage. They have never been completely tempered by language, which when we are young has still only flushed very shallow channels through the bed of thought in our minds. They are the purest images, which embody the questions by which I was absorbed in my early years and which now, as if the circle might one day close, preoccupy me again.

I can't really call them memories, as I do nothing, they catch me unawares—unless the nature of remembering changes with the years. Sometimes, as I doze, the echo of my breathing in the room around me seems to awaken past acoustic impulses. Rooms which had been piled wall against wall backstage in the wings of oblivion again enclose me. Roof tiles zip themselves over rafters into a skin of stone scales. Bricks converge into their old order. Beneath my feet floors regain their solidity, each hollow, echoing step makes corridors and passages recognize their vaults and niches. Bewildered, almost baffled, I enter those manoeuvrable crypts, as if lost in a cave full of paintings that come to life by trembling candlelight.

When I was young I wanted to know where time came from, whether it was a substance, like water or ether, which you can collect and keep or filter from deep inside things, just as my mother scooped bunches of currants into a muslin bag in July to squeeze the juice out of the fruit. I also wanted to know why I was myself, and not someone else, in a different place, at a different time or, on the contrary, at this time, and in the same place—someone who lived my life, with my relations and my school friends, but was not me.

"Then you'd be your own brother or sister," said my mother abruptly. For her everything was clear-cut. And yet in her life too time must have become less and less homogeneous as she grew older, with days that stretch out like twigs and double their inner volume; minutes in which scores of stories are concentrated, and the same number of dénouements and open endings. It would take centuries, and several universities, to understand the conversations between my mother and me in my childhood, to expose all the nuances and connotations vibrating in them, the presuppositions underlying the words, what we did not say or took for granted, all those fleeting essences, the unexpressed fear, concern, resentment and even love that travelled like stowaways in the belly of the words that we exchanged during our work.

For a long time I wondered why she is so curt when she visits my dreams, why only her voice is so direct and close. “The scissors, Helena!” she cries from a distance that sounds as long and narrow as an underground passage. While my father, sitting at the breakfast table, the table that I more or less recognize as the one in our summer residence, with the peaceful light of a cloudless morning in the bay window at his back, can be almost tangibly present.

He refills his cup or sits and reads the newspaper by his plate. On the walls the reflection of sunlight on water makes bobbing frescoes flow past.

Without looking up he turns to me. Unlike my mother, he speaks in whole sentences, but talks too fast, or too quietly, or too much under his breath, or has started to use a language that sounds Slavonic, with much passage of air between tongue and palate. I can hear him creating tension curves, pausing, laying down his sentences with such care that I become almost jealous of him for mastering the unsayable so fluently. If he were to be silent or say understandable inanities to me, I might wake up less upset.

I can see him before me fully formed, with all his traits and habits, his idiosyncrasies, his charm, as if the earth were summoning up from its mantles and products the material from which he was constructed and stacking him up in front of me again, at breakfast or knee-high in the surf, one day on holiday at the seaside, long ago. I hear the music of the beach as it was then, the women’s voices, screaming children, the calls of the pedlars and the snorting of the horses that pull the bathing carriages down to the waves—and there is the intense cold that splashes onto my shins from that sound landscape, the sharp taste of sea water, and his arm is placed over my belly and scoops me up, into the closeness of his body.

The sea water evaporates from the material of his bathing costume, making it rough with salt and releasing his body odour, at once sharp and sultry. When I press tight against his ribcage, out of the sea breeze, with my head on his shoulder and a hand on his ribs, I can immerse myself completely in his smell, and a miniature, private atmosphere surrounds me. I smell his skin, the sweaty hair in the nape of his neck, his sex, and when I hear him breathing in, his body becomes the sound box in which life resonated like nowhere else—because he is he and I am I.

There are people whose existence embodies a virtually pure note, or rather in whose existence life can be translated into sound with the sonority of a Stradivarius, lives that contain the mystery of what it is to be a human being, and there are others that will never produce much more than the shrill tooting of a tone-deaf child on the cheapest recorder. My father wasn’t a Stradivarius, nor was he a recorder. More and more often I think that an as yet unread universe would reveal itself if I could populate the stream of his monologues with my mother’s staccato vocabulary, his mumbling stories with the separate pebbles of her language.

In my mother’s eyes that would probably have amounted to the ultimate offence. In my teenage years she called me a born poetess because of my questions, and it wasn’t a compliment. It was considered normal for children to ask questions, with that slightly incongruous imagery that can easily be seen as poetic. Children still have that ability, I expect, but in my own childhood the grown-ups thought that the answers were set in stone, as firmly as their world. There was not much that needed thinking about. Things were as they were. Children’s questions were considered peculiar or at most amusing because the answers seemed so obvious.

I think, though, that I was more like an innocent philosopher or a little theologian—that might also have been possible— rather than a poetess. My mother regularly crowned me as a natural talent in

some discipline or other, whenever she found it necessary to make fun of me and set both of my feet on the ground, as good mothers do when their offspring threaten to kick over the traces. She usually saved her deepest sarcasm for poets. She called them pseudo-athletes. In so doing she betrayed herself, without realizing it, as a kindred spirit of Plato, who also disliked poets, but my mother lacked Plato's jealousy. She saw me reading and writing, and thought I should not lose myself in the process. But I did anyway.

Undoubtedly she would raise a sceptical eyebrow if she could now hear me say that the substance of the gods has not yet completely seeped out of a child.

"What grotesque self-glorification, Helena," she would sigh, and I'm not putting words in her mouth. I've heard her repeat it often enough, without looking up from the sewing with which we filled the long winter evenings during the war.

Meanwhile I am older than she was when she died. She now shares with the gods the situation of being outside time—and I still believe that I am right about the godliness of children and the childlike nature of the gods. The existence of each has the character of a dreamlike game since they have no knowledge of death. Their cruelties are light-footed, their tendernesses brutal. Melt the infinity of the dead together with the uninhibitedness of the child and what you get is a gruesome godhead.

At this point—I have seen her do it more than once—she would abruptly lay aside her mending. With both hands she would pull apart the worn-out seam of a garment or accidentally prick herself on one of her pins. Then she would get up and move away from the pool of lamplight in which she always did her work, rinse off her bleeding finger and light the gas under the kettle to make tea. From somewhere near the draining board she would moan that I talk nonsense, but it seems to me most probable that she would not say anything. To some sophistries she found a piqued silence the best retort.

She had no patience with things that transcended the immediately tangible. For her I was a poetess because in her eyes poets floated in the air. "That's true," I said to her later. "But head downward." I believe I meant it, though I may have dreamt it up on the spot so as to deny her the last word. I was gradually entering the school of rebelliousness.

Her sarcasm served a higher purpose. She wanted to thrust me into the everydayness of the word, squeeze my thoughts into sturdy winter clothes. Dreary but hard-wearing, and above all waterproof. For my mother trains of argument and items of clothing were one and the same: they must button up tight, while I liked nothing better than lazing about in the hanging gardens of Babylon in my open nightdress, proud of my blossoming curves, and climbing the ziggurats of books. I surrendered myself to the cadence of silent speech that rose from their spines, the Styx of sentences, in which here and there, like driftwood or drowning people, words and images floated, which I more or less already understood, alongside much else that was not much more than shadowy stains in a dark flood.

I still believe that books, like gods and children, inhabit a limbo in existence, a dimension in which effects can lead to causes and yesterdays crawl forth from tomorrows. It is impossible to make final judgements there: who deserves heaven and who hell. Everything is yet to happen and everything is already over; that is the essence of paradise.

As a child I regarded books as a kind of dead people, and actually I still do. Anyone who writes is organizing his own spirit realm. Books were filled with the same stillness as the stiff limbs of relatives on their deathbeds. True, they had more to say for themselves, but seemed like the dead to be yearning for a living spirit to linger in.

I liked the anonymous, the posthumous quality that every book carries in it. I found their titles and prefatory headings an unforgivable genuflection to vanity, or a kind of extenuation of the energy with which a story can take possession of you. That the writer should put his name on it for the benefit of the reader seemed to me almost as absurd as being assaulted by someone who first politely hands you their visiting card. I should have preferred to scratch the names off the covers and tear the title page from the body of the book. I even wanted to go further and liberate all those books from their static array on the shelves of the home library by giving them a home elsewhere, in other rooms, in the garden, among the beams of the shed, in the cellars, like Easter eggs or Christmas presents, nameless, indescribably vulnerable, their fate in the hands of whoever found them.

I have never been able to free myself from that fantasy, and have come to believe more and more firmly in it. Books should band together like feral dogs on street corners. They should have to sleep in piles in shop doorways under cardboard covers, beggars without much hope of alms. They should get soaked through with rain on park benches, or be scattered on the floor of the tram, in order to beguile or bore whoever picks them up, leave them indifferent or irritate them so much that they want to write a reply, which would then blow through the world just as namelessly. Somewhere that book will disturb an order, calm unrest, freeze happiness, commemorate the future or foretell the past, unidentified, announced at most by the rustling of the sheets—the only angels I more or less believe in.

Perhaps my mother's lack of understanding of my questions issued from a dislike of what she considered unforgivably provisional. She was more Catholic than she felt herself to be. However agnostic she might be, the divine was set in her thinking like a plug in a bathtub. God was the dam that people had thrown up in order to prevent the fatal encounter with their own bottomless longing. Pull out the plug or breach the dam, and everything runs out. It's far too late to ask her for clarification, but I know that she didn't like giving up. "We can't hang about hanging about," was her favourite pronouncement. "We must get to work. If the chicken doesn't lay, in the pot with it!" She liked exclamation marks and pronounced them audibly. They stood at the end of her sentences like gatekeepers with flaming swords: thus far and no farther.
