

# Bread

**Elvis Peeters**

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**p 7-19**

The night sky, that took some getting used to.

At home the stars appeared gold, softly glistening. Here they're silver, and much more distant. Not so much glistening, more trembling, as if the electricity might cut out at any moment.

It's not just the sky, the night is different too. With double, sometimes triple shadows, or more. Because of the lights, the ubiquitous glaring lights. The shadows don't know which way to run.

Sometimes I feel like a shadow. But I'm flesh and blood. With an immortal soul, as they say, although not everyone believes that. Some say the soul is just a word we use for lack of a better description, and even that it's not what the word means. That we're stammering.

I can predict the shadows on the street I'm walking along. Because I know the lights, every one.

That'll come in handy someday. I don't say so, I think it. Sometimes it's good to think things that you don't have to say.

Sometimes I don't know which language to think in.

Of course it's best when people understand you.

Not always easy.

Not always.

In the end I've learnt to say what people want to hear.

Incredible, all the things people want to hear.

Act normal.

People have no idea how much I wish I was normal.

When it rains hard, cardboard barely holds out for a quarter of an hour. It can help for ordinary cold and the shrieking wind, but it doesn't cut it against the bitter cold.

And if the bitter cold is inside you, it's utterly useless.

—

I was ten. Maybe eleven. Maybe nine. Maybe twelve. No one ever told me my precise date of birth. We didn't keep a record at home. I was whatever age fitted in.

He's big enough to help, they said. So I had to help.

He's old enough for school, they said. So I was allowed to go to school.

Can you read, they asked. So I read what I had learnt to read.

But whatever age they gave me, I wanted to play, to have fun.

Sometimes we romped around in a group of two or three, sometimes there were lots of us. We didn't often count. We chased one another, threw stones, made a kite together, pulled it apart, put it back together again, threw it into the air, abandoned it, built a boat.

We fought. We tripped each other up. We laughed at each other.

We laughed at the girls, they were chickens. They clucked.

I was eleven. Maybe ten. Maybe twelve. Maybe nine. I didn't know where to start counting.

School had been closed for half a year. In the previous months it had also regularly closed for a day or two. School had become dangerous.

That was when I heard people talking about leaving for the first time.

Seriously.

Father's voice, mother's voice, my older brother's.

My eldest sister said nothing.

My little brother and two little sisters were asleep.

The same month they talked about it again. Father's imploring voice, mother's searching voice, my brother's measured voice.

My eldest sister said nothing but her silence was as audible as wind that's not yet there and could flare up at any moment.

—

We heard rumbling in the hills.

A party, my friends and I thought. Or a storm.

But the grown-ups knew better.

At first it remained in the hills. Behind the hills, really, because the sky was bright blue on our side, with plump white clouds. Haze, devoid of rain.

We just saw the dust rise. And if you looked carefully, you could see the guns, the flashes of fire, and then you heard the bang roll along the slope.

Carnival. New Year's Eve. Those are the festivals they celebrate here. I know that.

I know now.

Do my hands know what they did?

Can you violate a soul you don't possess?

We had other festivals.

The bridge over the valley was decorated with streamers. From our house we could see lanterns in the village square the other side of the valley rocking in the balmy wind flowing down from the hills. Under the bridge lay wooden fencing where daredevils crept along the slopes to make fire with coloured smoke.

For us there were sweets and pastries and homemade lemonade. There was dancing and singing, and smoking and chewing. There was blindfolded fishing for a goldfish in a large bowl of water. And we children sat one behind another, we hid, we rolled in the dust.

We didn't throw stones, because it was a festival.

I sat with a girl behind a low wall. We heard the seeker wandering around on the gravel. We held our breath, the girl squeezed my arm. We didn't want to be the first to be caught, we made ourselves as small as we could, heads and shoulders pressed together.

She smelt sweet, her arms felt bony.

The boy searching for us went away and we separated ourselves. Her hair was stuck to my lips. We looked up at the swallows skimming overhead. I could still feel her bones against my ribs. She needed to pee, from the excitement, but we didn't dare leave the wall. She turned away from me, lifted her dress and pulled down her pants. She peed squatting in the sand. It smelt warm and salty, like with cows.

Suddenly there was the cry of the first to be found. We crept back together, I could smell that she had urinated.

Then they found us.

That must have been the last festival. The rumbling moved down the hills.

—

My uncle's house was falling apart.

Two direct hits, said my aunt.

The house wasn't well built, said father.

My uncle was wounded in the leg and back. Fortunately no one else was in the room. A side wall had fallen down and the roof had sunk in.

That all had long been crumbling and the roof was already something of a wreck, said father, the house really wasn't very well built.

It could be propped up.

Then the fields were destroyed. Smoke hung in the valley.

We no longer went to school.

We no longer played either.

We had to hide.

With lots of people in a hollow. Close together. Again I could smell the girl who had peed that time. But now I mainly smelt sweat. Girl sweat stank just as much as boy sweat.

We had to help, salvage whatever could be salvaged from the field, on hands and knees, harvest what remained to be harvested, carrots, turnips. We rooted in the ground and dug up the turnips, but stones too, the field was full of them. We hid them at the bottom of the baskets. Then we smirked about whoever carried the baskets to the cart: breaking his back lugging it along, seeing only the turnips on top.

What did I notice?

I noticed the swallows swooping overhead. I noticed the grasshoppers throwing themselves in their hundreds onto the area of ground we were trying to clear. I noticed the sweat seeping from my forehead and drawing the flies. I was constantly having to beat them off.

Later there was a dead man in the fields. My eldest brother saw him lying there and tried to keep me away.

Go and inform father and mother, he said.

I did, but first I went to see what sort of man it was.

Someone from a neighbouring village, said my brother. I didn't know how he knew that. The man's shirt was in tatters and clung to his chest, drenched in red.

Get away from there, said my brother, there could be a mine.

I ran home.

Stay inside, said my father. He went to inform others in the village. Mother gave my sisters and younger brother and me a hunk of bread dipped in sweet milk. We had to stay inside until father was back.

Later still the dead became more numerous. Sometimes they were just lying there in the street, the dead weren't even hiding anymore. One had a knife in his neck. They had tied his hands behind his back.

Someone who wasn't careful what he said, mother whispered, so watch your mouths.

From then on father and my eldest brother carried a knife.

What do you want with that knife, mother asked, isn't a knife as suspicious as a wrong word? I want you all back alive around the table in the evening.

Planes flew over. Sometimes six or eight in a day. Once in a while we saw them circling over the hills.

Swallows flew more erratically, and more cheerfully.

Then they disappeared behind the hills and very occasionally we heard the rattle of the on-board weapons.

One afternoon I saw a column of jeeps drive by. There must have been five or six, perhaps seven, it was difficult to count with the clouds of dust.

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Is it possible to store a memory in one language and recall it in another?

What is lost if you do?

Can I be sure it all happened the way I think it did?

I have to choose the language in which I forget the things I'd rather not tell people.

I can't allow the memories I want to cherish to be lost in another language.

—

The grownups' conversations were growing more and more worrying.

My eldest brother was counted as one of the grownups, I noticed. Perhaps because he was the first to discover that body and since then there had been no stopping it. If you can spot the dead like that, you'll also spot life, they probably thought. I had just stood there, clueless. My brother had thought about landmines.

In the village the ironmonger drove his car over a mine. All reduced to a heap of scrap metal. It was no laughing matter to him.

We weren't allowed to play beyond the houses anymore.

What do you want to play anyway? Aren't you too old to play by now?

One of my brothers was actually younger than me.

But sometimes the grownups were right.

I was eleven, maybe ten. Or twelve. I'd lost count, and no one cared. My sister who was born before me hadn't played for over a year.

Not since she grew breasts under her dress.

That's what one of my friends said, but I'd never seen them.

And the part she pees with looks different too.

What do you mean, I asked.

You'll see someday, he said. He didn't know any more. What did it matter anyway? The grownups said it couldn't last.

A plane had dropped a bomb on the bridge, early in the morning, an enormous bang, sand rising, the greengrocer's horse was frightened to death.

At first we only saw the dust. Then the bridge was gone. We could no longer get to the other side of the village.

The plane came back for a look. We all rushed back indoors.

Father was furious. My eldest brother had a gun.

Found it, he said, not far from the bridge, where there'd been a fight a couple of days before.

Father was truly livid.

You carry a knife yourself, my big brother remarked. And a knife's not always enough, sometimes it's too late for that, for a knife you have to be close by, usually it comes from further off.

You could immediately see that mother wasn't happy about it either.

There are others with guns, said my brother.

It's just not safe with a gun in the house, said mother.

I'll hide it outside, my brother tried, I'll never bring it in. Inside I can manage with a knife.

I thought that was brave of my brother, but father could have punched him; he rubbed his fist, mother laid a hand on his arm. You could see she would hold him back.

Not another word, said father.

My brother was right, there were others with guns. A guy had threatened my eldest sister with one.

It was just a joke, he said.

But still.

That's not what guns are for.

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**p 77-88**

I didn't hear anything more from father, mother and the youngest ones, my little brother and sister. I'd lost my phone, lost, stolen, it hardly made a difference. The continent of Europe offered happiness, that wasn't something to haggle over. I did odd jobs here and there, but still had little money on me.

I was caught. What could I prove?

What was the best place to have come from? What was the best age?

Maybe I was seventeen. Maybe I already looked twenty. What can you read off a face and a hand with a numb finger? Is it better not to understand the language if you want to tell a believable story?

It was better if I stayed sixteen for a while.

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Sand, rocky ground, desolate plains, that was what I knew. Here I found myself in a concrete park. An old bus station, someone said. With a fence around it now. There were dozens of languages and dialects. There was fighting. Because gestures can also vary from language to language.

I kept quiet. In some situations it's better to be inconspicuous. In others it's best to stand out right away. I had to bide my time. Keep my eyes open.

Where do you come from?

I didn't react.

Where do you come from?

I kept my mouth shut.

Where are you from?

I was silent. Until they spoke the right language. The one I considered the right language.

In some situations it's better to flounder in a language than to bring in an interpreter.

Where do you come from?

I named a place. They noted it down.  
Where are your parents? Do you have brothers, sisters?  
Yes, sisters, brothers, no parents.  
No parents? Father? Mother?  
Yes, father, yes, mother, no parents.  
What do you mean?  
Father, mother, no parents.  
I'd see later what it would be best to mean.  
Are they dead?  
Yes, sisters, brother dead, no parents.  
Who did you come here with?  
Alone.  
Who did you leave with?  
Alone.  
When did you leave that place?  
In the winter, I said. In the cold. At night. Always winter.

Being interrogated is something you have to learn. It occurred to me that my answers might raise new questions. But also that I could interrogate them with my answers. Which way would this go? That's what I wanted to know.

I've learnt the word trauma.  
I think I understand it.  
That it's not a lie, a word like that.

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**p 91-93**

The square filled up, more and more people came down. We stood packed together in the area between the house fronts.

Then the clocks struck.

The first rocket was launched. There was a hissing, and then the flash, a bang and a whirl of sparks, light and fire descending like a fountain.

From thousands of throats came an 'oooh' of admiration, some put their hands to their mouths.

Another rocket exploded, and another, and dozens splashed simultaneously in water falls, flares and flashes of countless slowly fading light particles above the city. Everyone looked up, enraptured, held their breath, here and there a child was hoisted onto shoulders, a flock of pigeons shot in panic over the roofs, enriching the spectacle with wings. One rocket after another danced above the city and again and again a sizzling cheer rose from the square. Everyone seemed happy, elated, festive. Oooh!

Whether I was seventeen or nineteen, I had never seen this before.

This was lively, colourful, exuberant, yet it was happening outside me. I watched the people in surprise. The way they were absorbed into the show as one swirling, multi-coloured crowd, many of them cheerfully dressed, with crazy hats and glittering hair. Horns, glasses, bottles, balloons and confetti in their hands. Then there was another bang and mouths fell open.

The mass started to move, I was pushed along with the others, towards a corner of the square, like a swelling wave, in front of me and behind people ducked away and surfaced, there was

laughter and booing, colourful light brushed our faces, I allowed myself to be carried along, left, right, we swayed across the square.

Oh, said the crowd. Ooh.

I became hemmed in inside a circle of laughing, mischievous, pushy, groping revellers, shoved back and forth, men, women, some stumbled, had to hold on to stay upright, someone shouted something, breathless cheering, booing here too, don't push, stop that, oh, a firecracker, wow.

Applause, the crowd quivered.

Someone grabbed my hand, you have to feel this, he said.

My hand slid up a leg, over a buttock, no, get off, I want to get out of here, said a voice, and suddenly I felt something I had never felt, my hand slid over the buttocks, between the legs of a girl, I felt the cunt, twat, snatch, fanny, pussy, all those words I knew, I'd learnt, and surprised at this opportunity I kept my hand there, I didn't see who she was, I was looking at her back, her neck, I heard her shouting, no, help, but the others were jeering, still, still, there goes another one, and a rocket exploded, oh, ooh, I felt with my fingers, to see whether it was true, that slit, those lips, whether they parted, and then I let go and tried to free myself from the bustle, because everywhere now they were shouting, stop that, help, assholes, perverts, scum, I knew those words too. I wanted to escape, get away from the square, to a side street, somewhere quiet, to the calm breath of the night, away from the fireworks. I saw policemen shielding a woman, she needed oxygen, other agents raised their batons, drove small groups apart to right and left, but I was already out of there.

I walked alone through the night towards the morning.