

WOODEN BIRDS

The door of the room opened suddenly and a red head burst in. Dijana's voice, breathless and impatient, was heard. "Come on now, Felicita! Shall we be waiting for you all day? Get that big arse of yours out of bed. You're dead inside, woman, dead."

The door was shut as quickly as it was opened; the antiseptic smell of the hospital corridor, Dijana's shrill voice and superficial but hurtful mocking remained outside.

Filiz, whom the lung patients called "Felicita" ("Happiness"), was in reality an extremely pessimistic, reserved and embittered person. Her status as a political emigré, her Ph.D. in history and the volumes of books in her room had rendered her a not-so-endearing intellectual in the eyes of the patients. "Ah, that Felicita of ours," Dijana would say, "I'd rather read a book on oncology than attempt a chat with her. She hardly ever opens her mouth." That dark and withered Felicita of ours! She was in the nick for two years in her country: Felicita, whose head was buried in books, who had not managed to learn to speak German without an accent in all these ten years!

Filiz got up from the bed very slowly. Her long-lasting illness—pneumonia in both lungs and chronic asthma—had taught her to use her strength sparingly. She would yield to the whims of her body that whined and begged continuously.

For the first time in eight months she was to leave the hospital premises. On the roll of patients in the recuperation phase who were granted the two-hour Saturday leave this week, there was also the name "Filiz Kumcuoğlu." Dijana, who had turned the hoodwinking of the nurse on duty at nights and the pinching of the patients' files into the greatest adventure of her hospital life, had been informed on Monday of this development. She had prepared "a big surprise." THE AMAZON EXPRESS! Filiz deserved to participate in the secret of the third-floor patients and embark upon the Amazon Express. In truth, Filiz had absolutely no expectations whatsoever. At the very most, they would go to the only settlement in a radius of thirty kilometres, T. village, and have a glass or two. Perhaps they might meet the village lads or the male patients of the men's sanatorium, as spent as themselves. What else was there to do in the midst of the Black Forest?

Filiz remembered all of a sudden, just as she was leaving the room, a story she had heard at least twenty years ago and then buried in one of the unfrequented recesses of her memory. At the beginning of this century, the consumptive female patients of the Halki Island Sanatorium would go in secret to the woods at night and make love with the consumptive male patients. Pale-faced women in white nighties, ordained to die, walking with torches alight in their hands... She had not believed the truth of the story, but found it poetic and tragic. Poetry had long forsaken her life; her personal tragedies had so multiplied that like parasitic plants they had drained the sap of her being.

Get out of the double-glazed door! Turn your back on that sombre, frowning, gray sign, 'T. Hospital, Unit of Lung Diseases' and looking neither left nor right, walk fast. To the line where the gigantic shadow of the building terminates. And right there, pause at the boundary of the empire of the sun, hold your breath and slowly take that single step, the single step that shall lead you out of the shadow. So that even the frail northern sun warms your back all of a sudden and you convince yourself that you can erase your past completely! Let the sun play little games in your hair, let the woods be attired in raw colors, let the lineaments of the world be obliterated and let truth be transformed into pure light.

Filiz recalled Nadezda, who dreamt she would fly up into the skies if she but raised her arms, the unhappy Nadezda of Chekhov's "The Duel." She felt like a Chekhovian heroine. She might perhaps be transformed into a bird there and then, but only a wooden bird. An inanimate, helpless, ridiculous bird whose wings were not for flying but only for emitting mechanical noises. She was filled with a painful fervor. She wanted simultaneously to laugh and to cry, to live and to die.

"Come on now, Felicita! You stand frozen like a mummy. We're late."

Gerda's contralto voice, thick with smoking and tuberculosis, joined Dijana's. "You'll miss the Amazon Express!"

The group that met in front of the garden gate consisted of six women. "Three foreigners, three Germans. Three with tuberculosis, three with asthma," classified Filiz on the spot. "The Germans all

have tuberculosis, us of the third world, asthma. Quite the contrary would have been expected." Martha and Gerda, two tall and stout blond Germans, had managed to remain strong and hefty in spite of tuberculosis. (In fact Gerda was not very tall, nor could she be called blond, but Filiz's eyes, insensitive to personal details, saw the two women as identical and placed them as representatives of the working class in the small community.) Filiz was a little wary of the physical strength of these women, of their crudeness and their determination in defending whatever was to their benefit, but at the same time she secretly envied them. The third German was the twenty-year-old Beatrice, skinny as a totem pole, cheeks sunken, an introvert ex-heroin addict. This girl, with her chestnut hair cropped short, her wistful eyes that seemed to be always looking for something she had lost and her adolescent body that resembled a withered tree, made Filiz sad. The playful red fox Dijana had a finger in every pie. She cared for nothing, didn't get annoyed at anything. Except for being called Yugoslavian instead of Croatian. And Graciella from Argentina...

At the sanatorium the only patient as ostracized as Filiz, perhaps even more so, was Graciella. The very sight of this woman, distinguished by birth and wealth and unanimously described with epithets such as 'elite, graceful, cultured' amongst lung patients, was an example of the dry humor of life. She was about one hundred and fifty-eight centimeters in height (shorter even than Filiz), dainty and of a slender build. With her straight fringed hair, her 'Marlene Dietrich' eyebrows which she shaped without fail even in hospital, her almond eyes which had at once both a warm and an icy expression, she had acquired the appellation 'Evita.' She was the pet of the doctors and the nurses; they treated her like a rare, fragile antique vase. In any case, she tended to leave the impression that the whole world should treat her with care and consideration. Filiz, however, had sensed the hardness in the perfect lineaments of her face, which resembled a feminine china bibelot. Graciella had a smile which inspired fear in people. She reminded Filiz of her pleasant, ladylike primary school teacher who had worn a scarf every day and turned into a first-class torturer the moment she entered the classroom.

The first time Filiz had seen Graciella, she thought she was a visitor who had entered the patients' canteen by mistake. She was at a table for one by the window; she was wearing a straight black velvet skirt and a shirt with eye-catching buttons open down to the breast-line. Between two attractive boobs glittered a heart-shaped necklace. High-heeled and buckled 'tango shoes' and nylon stockings provided the final touch. Amongst patients with greasy hair, wandering about in tracksuits and sandals, she looked like a rare tropical flower. Be that as it may, Dijana, editor of the hospital gossip news, had noisily entered Filiz's room one day and disclosed a secret.

"Did you know that Argentinian Evita is just like you?"

"What do you mean, 'just like you'?"

"A political émigré, that is. Imprisonment, torture and stuff. That's how her lungs had it. Her ex-husband was a diplomat. Both came of wealthy, well-established families and had influential friends. But then the man provoked someone and an order for his arrest was issued. Within two hours he vanished into thin air. Leaving his wife behind. For two months they tried to make Graciella talk, but they couldn't get from her the whereabouts of her husband. Perhaps she didn't know. Would you believe it of that frail woman? One should not be deceived by appearances."

This was a devastating blow for Filiz. It was as if her deepest afflictions were being made light of and Filiz K., with her personality and history, had been rendered worthless. In her own ego she had created a mythological heroine of herself; she could sustain her life only by believing in this heroine. The memory of her awful past was indispensable as a proof of her existence and had acquired a sacred niche in her soul. But that snob of a woman had spat in the face of her icons. What right had she to claim possession of the same tragedies as the strong, daring and principled Filiz (that's how she would describe herself) who had paid the price of her convictions? And in the name of a love felt for a base man with a paunch and a couple of mistresses, too!

The group of sick women was walking along the narrow tarmac road which meandered like a gray snake down to the T. valley. Right at the start of the journey a mitotic division had occurred. The group of pioneers consisting of Dijana and the two large Germans were engaged in a light chat. A Saturday chat that moved from one topic to another, topics that interested Filiz not in the least. The doctors were thoroughly criticized—the food in the cafeteria and the coffee were condemned, along with television programs, a comparison of Banderas and Pitt and so on... The Germans were defending Banderas while Dijana, who admired the German race, was for Pitt. One or two memoirs pertaining to

the pre-hospital period... In the factory where Martha worked four years ago, one of the female hands had been found naked with her throat cut. Gerda also had in her stock a few tales of murder; she recovered one such from the deep freeze in order to warm it up and present it. As for Dijana, whose family lived in Bosnia, she said not a word about savagery; she hid behind a silence that gathered more and more like an avalanche.

Not having at all decided where she belonged, Beatrice walked alone. She was listening to her inner world. She was trying to take in, without wasting a single drop, this extraordinary September afternoon, the emerald green valley that lay before her, the couple of hours of freedom. She seemed happy, and happiness on this ruined young face was for some reason even more poignant than a grimace.

Filiz had fallen in beside Graciella and was trying in vain to discover a topic for conversation. The silence between them was long and thorny.

“Seeing you on the Amazon Express is quite a surprise, indeed.”

“Why?” inquired Graciella harshly. In her eyes there glittered a cold flame which was a reflection of the anger which, like ore, had been hidden inside her for years. “They did not tell you where we’re heading, did they?”

“No, they conceal it as if it were a great secret.”

“It is truly a great secret, the Amazon Express. (A mocking, calculating tone, a smile like the mark of a scar.) Even you will be amazed.”

“Perhaps we’re going to the village?”

Graciella placed upon her lips a long fingernail painted with a cherry-red varnish. “Hush,” said she, like the nurse in the “Be Quiet” poster in the hospital.

Filiz had neither the courage nor the desire to keep up the conversation. She devoted herself to getting the utmost enjoyment out of the trip. She was outside, after eight months, walking in a fairytale forest, inhaling the air, placid like water, pure and delicious. This very air purified the past of all its squalor as it filled her exhausted lungs. A loving, generous sun, an infinity of green that stretched to the horizon and the ordinary, simple, gorgeous happiness of walking as much as she liked without any barriers... Without any closed doors confronting her... The iron-barred doors of prison wards, the hospital doors with the room numbers written on them, soundproof and with the hinges greased... A healthy person could never comprehend the illimitable pleasure arising from exercising one’s legs freely and carrying one’s body. Filiz perceived the incomparable scent peculiar to the forest. This scent, not sweet and domestic like that of the newly-mown hospital grounds, was crude and earthy and made one dizzy. Perhaps it was the odd silence that made Filiz’s head swim. The T. valley was spread before her like a thickly-knotted green carpet and the hills were winking, as it were, behind one another’s backs. In the valley deepened by the light of fall, sun and shade were engaged in an interminable battle to claim the land. The crucifix of the village church shining like gold could be seen in the distance. “Everything is so bright and carefree that it hurts,” she reflected.

Beatrice, her palms full of wild strawberries, approached the party of dark-haired women. She must have solved her identity crisis and resolved to belong with the “aliens.” The tragic bond that drew those two ex-prisoners to each other was pervading and swallowing Beatrice too, like the web of a poisonous spider. Heroin had taught her solitude, despair and ruin, and although the youngest, she was the most intimate with death. She had carried death in her half-child body. The others had struggled to believe in life, hold on to life, be a part of life and they were still struggling, but she, as early as sixteen, had rejected life. Heroin, prostitution, jaundice, tuberculosis... She had received consecutive mortal blows, but each time, had pulled herself up like a boxer at the count of nine before the knockout bell sounded and went on to receive the blows.

“Would you like some wild strawberries?” (No, neither does.)

“Last night there was a program about Argentina on television. Did you watch it?” (No, neither had.)

“It showed Buenos Aires. An extraordinary city. So sad! Reminds one a little of Berlin: the architecture, the cafés... There’s a district full of houses the colors of the rainbow: Elbakar—”

“El Boca,” corrected Graciella. “It means the mouth. The birthplace of the tango.”

“Yes, yes. El Boca. The district of the marginals, painters, musicians.”

“Apparently it’s now full of pickpockets and vendors of souvenirs.”

“Do you know how to tango?” burst in Filiz.

“No, I’m not from Buenos Aires. I’m from Mendoza.” (For some reason Filiz was sure this woman was from Buenos Aires and could dance the tango perfectly.)

“Mendoza?”

“On the border with Chile. A city at the foot of the Aconcagua.”

“Aconcagua. The highest mountain in South America.” (Compared to these Germans, even a heroin addict is well-educated!)

Silence. The labored conversation terminated all at once, as if cut with a knife, as if the three women had nothing to say to one another. “Look, look! See that loop on that low branch!” Beatrice failed to control the fervor in her voice: the two middle-aged women stared amazed at the nondescript piece of rope. “A dwarf might well have committed suicide here,” continued Beatrice, with a poisonous imagination inspired by her twenty years and the heroin. But immediately remembering that her companions were extremely short, she blushed. Nobody, however, had taken it personally.

When the group of women left the road going to the valley and turned west towards the sheer hills covered with thick woods, Filiz began to grow suspicious. They were not going to T. village then. Perhaps like school kids or prisoners, they had picked a secret corner of paradise for the Saturday license. But if such were the case, they would not have to check their watches every so often and hurry on. “The Amazon Express!” Did they mean the rain forests or the legendary women, expert hunters and warriors, who had cut men off from their lives the way they had chopped off their right breasts?

They were no longer walking along the wide and sunny tarmac road; they were proceeding in a single line along a path covered with shrubs and tree roots where the vegetation did not allow for easy passage. The forest journey had commenced for real. Even the sun was now clad in green. A journey teeming with thorns, underbrush and beds of fern which, after warning the unfamiliar travelers lightly at first, was growing increasingly more aggressive; a journey teeming with brown butterflies that fluttered hither and thither among the branches, shy mushrooms that hid in shady nooks, and autumn flowers. Pearls of rain dripping down the leaves, the saturated, sticky moss on the tree trunks, the refracted colors of the daylight... Streams that continuously intercepted the trail: the vital arteries of the forest... Seductive paths that revealed no clues as to their destination...

Filiz had always lived in big cities; she did not know the forest. True, she had been in a sanatorium at the center of the Black Forest for the last eight months, but there, too, the forest had remained inaccessible; it remained abstract and mysterious. At night, the darkness that descended before her window like a dark bird and the roars that accompanied her nightmares were a huge deaf and dumb sentinel that prevented her from going out and returning to her real life—whatever that was. But now, having entered the very core, the very heart of the forest, she saw it truly for the first time. This was more than a meeting; it was the sudden encounter between two beings that had been unaware of each other’s existence. That’s why it had a shattering impact on her. Before her was a simple, primitive, magnificent spirit, like that of the ocean. Having directed her out of her dusty and parched nutshell of a world, it was making her listen to the vibration of a completely different plane of existence. The forest had a savage and multicolored throb, beating like a pulse. It was covered with shades, contradictions and shiverings; a vibrant and misty air was spread over its secrets like a tulle. Trees, trees, trees... Ancient, venerable, proud, tall, profuse, commanding trees... They were as somber as if they had born witness to each and every miracle and crime on earth. Older even than time... They had struck their roots deep; in their journey that had as its goal the sky, and only the sky, they had made enough progress which showed that they had not been blown here and there randomly.

When they slowed down at the foot of a steep hill, Dijana pulled Filiz aside.

“This is not quite the time, but,” she paused a few seconds trying to regain her breath. “We must get together tonight. Well, I wrote Hans a letter.”

“Have you posted the last letter I wrote—we wrote together?”

Filiz realized how breathless and thirsty she was when she began to talk. Her mouth was so parched that she had difficulty moving her tongue.

“Of course, that very day. No reply yet. Let me see, it’s been nine days. Must have been delayed in the post. Besides, Hans is a little slow.”

“You do believe he’ll reply, don’t you?”

Lightning struck in Dijana's amber eyes. Her face was covered with rain clouds. "It's not that I believe it. I can sense it."

About a couple of months ago, returning from the medical director's office, Filiz had seen Dijana in one of the phone booths on the ground floor. Grasping the phone with both hands, she was talking and at the same time crying without a pause. At first she thought Dijana had received yet more terrible news from Bosnia—it was in one of these booths that Dijana had been informed by a deep voice at the end of a line frequently cut off that her sister had passed away in Bosnia. Fortunately it wasn't so this time. Dijana's last boyfriend, Hans, the tall blade, was more than fed up with this consumptive ruin of a woman with noisy breathing, bags under her eyes and his dreary hospital visits. The two women had jointly written five letters to Hans, but Filiz's sensitive and impressive pen hadn't helped, and no reply had ensued.

"If I were you I'd put him out of my mind at once."

Filiz was aware that her attitude was fierce and merciless, but she was extremely tired. She was wallowing in sweat and terribly thirsty; the veins in her over-strained legs throbbed. She had no more resources left to deal with Dijana's problems.

"You have a heart of stone!"

"There are bound to be a few stones in my heart, too. Alright, let's have a go at making him jealous then."

"What, in the midst of the forest? Were men, and not cones, to drop from trees, perhaps!"

"We could insinuate that there was a romantic prelude between you and one of the doctors. And we'll pick someone with attributes quite the opposite of Hans's. 'Long and slim, the fingers of the surgeon,' 'walks in the forest on moonlit nights' and so on."

Dijana smiled; she had at once recovered her customary joyfulness. She had indeed an extraordinary smile that could completely transform her disproportionate face. She was touchingly simple, sincere and unaffected. Filiz thought she had never before seen an expression that spoke so directly of happiness.

"I want him back." Her face was beginning to cloud over again. There was a tremor, a vague plea in her voice. It was as though if she could but prove that she really wanted Hans, a divine justice would send him back to her. The dark shadow that hid behind her ebullience and nonchalance revealed itself only at moments such as these. Dijana would hide her true self in extremely secret passageways as if it were a monster that should not be allowed the sight of daylight.

"He'll come back, I'm sure," said Filiz, in a peremptory tone, quite pissed off. She enjoyed neither telling lies nor discussing men. She did not believe in love; she no longer remembered whether she had loved or not once upon a time, prior to the thirty-three days she had counted in off a cell full of blood and screams.

"Dijana! Dijana!"

"Yes, what is it?"

"We're very late! We won't get there at this pace. We must take the shortcut."

"Just a minute. I'm coming over to you. Let's see how we're doing."

With uncertain steps she ran towards the Germans. Filiz suddenly felt Graciella's red-hot eyes upon her. She turned; two pairs of eyes met, suffering, ardent and profound. A communication that could not have been expressed in words was immediately and spontaneously established between them.

"If you care for a bit of happiness in this world, you must be transformed into a little girl skipping and hopping hither and thither."

Graciella's face remained completely unmoved. Did she understand? No doubt she did.

"Have you ever heard of the Brazilian Paolinho?"

"No, in truth I know almost next to nothing about South American music."

Suddenly Graciella began to sing. This was a miracle, something unexpected, amazing, moving, extraordinary... "Vida e bonita..."

An unbelievably sad, silky melody that struck one's heart. A piece of music that could simultaneously give one both pain and happiness, that drew one closer to both death and life. Filiz's eyes were full; she gulped in order not to cry. She would not cry in front of others, nor would she sing, even if they pointed a gun at her head.

“This is what the lyrics mean: life is beautiful, beautiful, beautiful... It’s full of grief and joy, but still beautiful... Don’t be ashamed of wishing to be happy... Paolinho was born in the streets, suffered from poverty and died of tuberculosis at the age of thirty-three. I explain all this so that you don’t turn up your nose at the song.”

“If someone who has hit the bottom of a chasm tells me life is beautiful, I suppose I ought to stop and lend my ear. But in order to truly appreciate this music, one needs to have suffered a different kind of pain.”

Dijana interfered. “Listen, Felicita, we have to take the shortcut. We have very little time left. Will you be able to stand a mountain path that all in all takes twenty-five minutes but is absolutely killing? How fare the bellows?”

“They have not started complaining as yet. But I don’t understand this. What are we late for?”

“It’s the very essence of the matter that you don’t know where you’re going until you get there. You have to decide right here and now whether you’re coming or not because we can’t leave you here on the middle of the mountain. You’ll appreciate that we can’t cart you on our backs either.”

“I’m coming. I don’t quit half way.”

“Come on girls, Felicita too is with us! Women’s Brigade! Forward march!”

From every quarter rose screams, jokes, commands. “Come on, the Amazon Express! Here we come!”... “Avina!”... “We may die, but we won’t give up!”

“Oh, my God! What hysteria, what tomfoolery!” thought Filiz. “And now we begin to play soldiers. A bunch of half-mad tubercular women. All we need is bells!”

Raising hell, screaming and shouting, the crew of women took to the mountain path. The inhabitants of the forest fled, the birds grew silent; nature quietly moved aside to make way for these boisterous, clumsy and selfish animals. Dijana, who knew the trail well, was proceeding swiftly in the front like an Indian pathfinder, determining the route and discovering the tracks. Immediately behind her could be discerned the wide backs of Martha and Gerda. Backs that were strong, that did not give in, that trusted only themselves... With clumsy but firm steps, they crossed the mountains; they broke branches and bushes, when necessary, opening the way like trailblazing tanks, raining commands on those behind. Beatrice climbed like a wildcat that had managed to break free of its cage. With her long agile legs and mountain boots, and above all her youth, she was as supple and at ease as a mountain goat. In fact she frequently paused to lend a helping hand to her black-haired companions in distress.

Filiz spent the forest journey of twenty-five minutes sweating profusely, trying to hold on to thorny bushes and roots, looking in a flurry for firm stones upon which to place her feet, nearly passing out in panic and anxiety. She kept slipping and falling on pine needles and stumbling and floundering over roots. The bushes escaped from her hands, leaving pink marks, the branches rained harsh smacks. Her muscles, grown limp through long disuse, began to tremble like a diapason and in place of her legs there seemed to be two aching hot water bottles. The shivers that made her teeth chatter wriggled like cold snakes on her sweaty back. She was soaked to her underwear and could not relinquish the thought that it was fatal for a lung patient, especially one who had been granted permission to go out that very day, to perspire so heavily. Moreover, her lungs emitted that terrifying wheeze known in the hospital jargon as the “shift bell.” She rained curses upon herself for having joined this adventure and jeopardizing, for nothing, the health she had recovered with immense difficulty. She was about to cry out of exhaustion, regret and desperation. Seeking refuge in her personal God, whom she resorted to only when deep in trouble, she implored devoutly, reciting prayer after prayer.

Like all things terrible, like bodily pain or imprisonment, the journey too finally ended and Filiz, raising her eyes from the path, could look around to see where she was. During those dreadful twenty-five minutes when each subsequent step to be taken was a matter of life and death, she had wallowed in her own body and fear, taking no interest in her surroundings. But now, breathless, with a tightness in her heart, blinking her eyes that burnt with salt, she could see that they had reached an extraordinary place.

They were on top of a very steep hill, wound, as if with a gigantic fish net, with bushes, tree roots and scrub as tall as men. Forty or fifty meters below flowed an angry river, frothing and roaring in fury, dealing endless blows to the rocks it had carved out in notches. A path bedecked with purple flowers that resembled large carnations was embroidered, like delicate needlework, across the face of

the cliff along the horn-shaped visible slice of the river before it cut a sharp bend to disappear in the rocks. ‘The path of purple dreams,’ reflected Filiz.

“We shall descend from here, Felicita. You’ve got to be very careful.”

Filiz stared in amazement at her companions. They all looked devastated. Their faces, turned a livid hue, were sweaty, muddy and full of scratches. Their hair and their shirts that hung loose from their trousers were thoroughly drenched, and their nipples conspicuous. They had fallen many a time and had cuts all over. What were these women after? Wherefore all this struggle, danger and injury?

“Look, I’ve had just enough! Running through the forest like maniacs was not enough and now we have to go down the chasm! What’s going on?”

“Don’t be a spoilsport,” hissed Dijana. “You promised to follow until the end.”

“I gave no such promise.”

“Let her do as she pleases.” It was Martha. No. Gerda.

“Feliz, please try a little harder. Believe me, it’s going to be worth it.” It was Graciella.

“Come on, Filiz, please.” Beatrice held her arm, pulling it gently.

“Come on, girls! It’s three twenty-three! Seven minutes to go!”

The group instantly forgot about Filiz and started moving, like an acorn rolling downhill upon a single flick. Drawing upon the last dregs of their strength, the women, holding on to branches, stones, anything they could lay their hands on, often sliding on their bottoms, holding hands to lend one another support, were descending to the river. A single false step meant being torn to pieces down the chasm. Filiz too became a link of the chain, without even thinking. She had bowed down to the transcendent power that had called her and joined in the journey along the delicate, sharp and slippery border between life and death. Danger had stimulated her, whipping all her sensations. She was full of a sensation akin to sexual desire. Life she loved so deeply at this very moment, feeling deep inside the joy of existence. What she held in her hands was not a stone or a bush, but the stupendous wounded heart of the forest, of the world, of life. A tree that had bent almost parallel to the stream crossed her path. It had released its squid-like roots in the hard rock and with perseverance, stubbornness and determination succeeded in growing upon this sheer hill. Its shadow fell upon the chasm. It offered Filiz one of its tired limbs; for a brief moment, for the duration of a brief moment before each continued with her makeshift journey and life, they held hands.

After a descent that was akin to crossing hell from one end to the other, they had reached a completely different world. Trees eager for friends, dreamflowers and all traces of life had vanished from sight. Here there were rocks and only rocks, terrifying, cold rocks... They were much larger than seen from above. They stretched up to the sky like bright sable daggers. And there was also the terrible noise of the river, its anger for no reason and for no cause... Filiz felt she was upon a stage; the company of marionettes had broken loose and picked upon this spot to enact their mysterious parts.

Before Filiz’s eyes, wide open with amazement, Dijana sat upon a rock the size of a double bed and struck a pose peculiar to third-rate porno magazines. Bending her knees slightly, she opened her legs sideways in a V shape and placed her hands on her crotch. On her face she had put on a ‘pre-orgasm’ expression enraptured with sexual pleasure. And Martha was lying with her profile to the stream, one knee pulled to her belly, her head pushed back and her hands clasped at her nape. On her face too there was an identical sordid and whorish sexuality for sale. Gerda exhibited, in the crawling position, her magnificent arse. Beatrice was standing with one foot resting on the rocks, bending forward with her arms hanging down. She had placed her cheek on her knee, as if leaning on the shoulder of a loving and passionate man. She looked at the water with dreamy blue eyes. Confronted with this mind-boggling sight, Filiz sought, as a last resort, Graciella, but she had long since joined in the game. On top of a sail-shaped rock, she was standing, alone, immobile and half-naked, like the statue of a goddess. She had stripped off her shirt, and resting her right hand on her waist, slightly arched her breasts. Her posture reminded Filiz of a pigeon: she was natural, innocent and fragile. Between the two blackberry-colored nipples, there were stripes of seared scars hiding behind her silver necklace. She had her eyes fixed on a point in the sky. The slim fingers of her left hand wandered upon her half-open lips taut with thirst. She just seemed unable to speak and give tongue to her intense and excruciating passion. Her whole body, grown thin and elongated, was transformed into an arrow aiming at the sky. She was ready to launch and hit the target. Filiz found herself in an incredible dream

from which she could not wake up; even in dreams there would be more meaning and internal consistency.

“Felicita, come on now, give us a pose, go on. Find something amusing.”

Filiz continued to stand as rigid as the Sphinx. She could comprehend nothing. Gerda’s accurate watch struck three-thirty. At first nothing happened. For a minute that was heavy and dissolving in mists, the women waited, almost without breathing, stuck in those ridiculous, farcical, and strange poses of theirs. And finally, a canoe was sighted amongst the rocks. Four young men, four young, healthy and robust sportsmen belonging, as could be read from the emblems on their life-vests, to the rowing-team of the H. University seventy kilometers away, pulled on the oars with all their might, waging a superhuman fight not to be torn to pieces by the sharp rocks in this narrowest and most dangerous pass of the stream. They sighted the women. Where they saw them every Saturday.

“Hey, forest nymphs! You again? We’ll call upon your village today!”

“Girls, open up a little more, won’t you?”

“We’ll park the canoe and come back. Don’t you disappear anywhere!”

“Redhead, what good is it if you don’t take off your trousers?”

The women offered no replies; they were not even giggling. They were rigid and frozen, more silent even than marionettes.

Whistles, screams and coarse but not totally indecorous jokes... A few reckless words on Beatrice’s thinness, Dijana’s naughtily exposed crutch, Gerda’s bottom, Graciella’s naked breasts... As for Felicita, she just stood there immobile, striking her own pose, petrified with amazement, thinking, remembering and feeling nothing, unable to remove her eyes from Graciella’s breasts and scars proffered to the whole world. At last, when the canoe was about to disappear from sight, Filiz’s arms slowly rose to the air. Like the wings of a wooden bird that had long ago forgotten to fly, they spread sideways, pausing and with difficulty, but immediately exhausted, closed upon her head. Like broken wings they collapsed upon each other. Graciella’s voice, coming from a totally different world, was indistinctly heard amidst the fury of the stream and the screams growing more and more distant. “Vida e bonita...”

Two warm drops rose in Filiz’s eyes and trickled down her cheeks, leaving traces like a muddy yellow stream. The canoe had long disappeared and the women were left all by themselves amidst the forest.

Translated by Nebile Direkçigil

“Tahta Kuşlar,” (unpublished short story).