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Sons, Daughters

Translated by Ellen Elias Bursać

1,

My darling mother. Most of all I'd love to snuggle into her lap and tell her everything. But now this is no longer possible. Most of the day my eyes are trained on the ceiling. Covered in tiny imperfections, it is spacious, shadow retreats across it in the morning, then the sunlight lets loose a whiteness as if a thick dark curtain has been drawn back before a stage on which another endless day will play out in its depths. Around noon, before the blazing starts, the ceiling becomes hard and impermeable. Something is dripping warmly across my face from the corners of my eyes, but doctors say this isn't tears but the bodily fluid that moistens the cornea. Then I have to squint some because the whiteness begins to fragment and scatter before me, to pierce and drill holes in my irises until I can no longer see. Occasionally I doze off. My cycles of waking and sleeping are there just as they are for normal people. And though I know nothing will have changed, when I come back I gradually and steadily ingest meter by square meter with my dry gaze. I start from above the head of the bed and then swim slowly toward the other side as far as I'm allowed. Sometimes there is a fly, plump, frisky and loud, with silken, rapid wings, and nuzzling, tacky legs. It's poised up there and stares down at the thousand of me. Not a single one of me moves and then I start worrying that my immobility will be replaced by the rot that houseflies are happiest gorging on, even when there is something else to eat. I'm all that's here and that's why the fly will first explore me with the shiny tip of its proboscis, perhaps over the thin skin of my transparent forearms, and then whatever it can't chew it will dissolve with its potent saliva. Once while I was jogging down a road by a wooded area, I happened across the putrid dead body of a cat. Early summer, morning. The plant world was insufferable with the burgeoning of life, midges rammed mindlessly, frantic into the eyes and mouth, huge rabbits came all the way down to the road, the smells in the air were so honeyed that they dizzied the mind and aroused

aggression, but from beneath the splendor of abundance came the reek of the power of decay. First I sniffed it, and only then did I spot the carcass lying on a greasy stain on the washed-out pavement. All its fur was gone, there were two shallow holes where its eyes had been, and the entire, still clearly feline, shape looked as if it had been drenched in gasoline. A swarm of flies had bathed it liberally in slobber, sucking from it the last crumbs of nutriment as if they'd be going on to live forever, instead of surviving hardly more than two weeks. But that is how we, too, feed. The putrid smell rankled my nostrils, lungs and brain, I needed to run at least two more kilometers for the smog to override it and release me. Sometimes I feel, while I'm lying in the dark, that I can sniff out its edge, almost sweet and certainly mortal, so much so that it makes me retch. This is a life-saving reflex, a reflex that nature gave us to aid in steering us away from the rotten and the diseased, but how do we get away from our own selves? I draw the vapors in deep, but still I can't be sure whether this really is the smell or just my ache for the feline form which there, by the side of the road, couldn't have cared less while other creatures were guzzling it. The fly abruptly buzzes off, circles around the dead neon light, swings even closer, hawks spit into its tiny hands, rubs them together, shoots a glance at me and gauges that the time has not yet come. It drops back, gives a buzz, and soon it's gone. Back into the white. The central point on the ceiling is occupied by a ribbed neon light fixture, made of four linear lightbulbs, one of which is flickering. When I close my eyes, instead of seeing it I see a lamp that hung in a room long ago. I know its every curving surface, every stretch of shadow which like a spider circles the black hole in the middle. Four down-facing cup-shaped shades made of milky white glass, and in each—a small, narrow bulb. Each shade was threaded onto the end of a stylized rounded wooden arm; along the side of each of the arms ran a groove and in the groove there was dust. A skinny, gray, splendid stripe of dust she never touched. A site of defiance in the room, a veiled rebellion, a hope into which with all my strength I send my thoughts when I stare for ages into my lids. I moisten my eyes, open them and count the neon ribs. It's not that this time there will be more, but giving meaning to brief stretches of time during the endless day is the most that can be done. Although the result is easily predictable, I'm tickled when the

effort I'm making briefly blurs my vision so that instead of twenty-four I count twenty-three. The agreeable joy of those little self-delusions.

When a day is cloudy, the ceiling almost softens by twilight, it descends tenderly toward my motionless face and then I let myself lower my eyes, I'm no longer confrontational, I'm not drilling into it with my gaze, it offers no resistance and then I float. We merge, my sky and I, and for those several moments of twilight I feel a mild breeze caress my face, I rise, pull out the tubes without a thought, I peel a rubber band off my wrist and fix my hair back in a high ponytail, slip on my shoes, get up off the bed, and carefully smooth the bedding. I straighten my shoulders, take the three steps to the door, drop a hand onto the door handle, overcome the resistance of the brass, press it and out I go.

When I return the sky is black. Barbed with the shadows of little bulges, it descends in toothed jags to right above the surface of my body whose borders nobody acknowledges, a body melded by the desires and assessments of others, a body neglected and squandered. The light no longer shines in through the window, but gleams from across the room through the slender gap of a half-closed door, the bluish light of a television set, the yellow light of someone's cough, the oily light of antiseptics. The touch of her smooth hand to the cheek shuts them off one by one. The ceiling drops off to sleep. She pushes me gently over the edge and until morning I fall.

2,

I could just picture her. When they let her know I was in the hospital, I just bet she was polishing dinner glasses. The odor of vinegar stung her eyes though she'd opened all the windows to keep the air moving through the room, but she always trusted most the solutions that required her to suffer. The sterilizing of cloth diapers by boiling them on the stovetop instead of in a washing machine, she'd hold forth with passion about their whiteness and the absence of bacteria, swiftly pivoting to the challenges of childrearing. She always repeated, in the same rhythm of unquestioned prophesy: little kids drink milk, big kids drink your blood. The home phone rang, this may have rattled her, she was hardly ever called except by a random telephone operator or someone conducting a survey and then she'd vent her bitterness on them. She'd purse her wrinkled upper lip and with disgust she'd snap, "Not interested." She'd mumble into her chin, "Whatever inspired them to rope me in? Fuck their survey." Maybe she was hoping the caller was her son. "Just called to see what you're up to, Ma, sending a fond word your way." At the sound of the ringtone she cringed. Her small, tense frame tensed even more, and then she quickly straightened her aching knee. She set the polished glass on the cupboard shelf, grumpily registering out of the corner of her eye that there was no visible difference between the glasses she had yet to take out and the one she had just put back. But her insights about cleanliness, including personal hygiene, went far beyond what the eye could see. She took the phone receiver in hand, pressed the 'on' button, and in a muffled, raspy voice, because she hadn't yet spoken with anyone that day, said "Hello." Then the chaos hit. When she was younger, she'd kept a level head in crisis, not one to panic she'd pull herself together in a flash, but as she aged, and what with the wringer we'd put her through, she lost her equilibrium. All sorts of things raced through her mind, had she misheard, was this a wrong number, was someone pranking her. With the receiver on her ear she staggered mindlessly around the apartment, repeating the same questions: "What

happened? Lucija? Where's she now? How? Where do I need to be?" The person at the other end of the line was probably used to the panic caused by the sentence: "Ma'am, your daughter has been in a car accident, she's in the hospital now, we can't say any more over the phone, please get here as soon as you can." And then she'd repeat the same sentence calmly, distinctly, as many times as needed, and meanwhile, in the pauses, inspecting her fingernails or doodling on the calendar at the front desk. When she hung up the phone, only then did her panic swamp her, she wasn't sure she'd remembered which hospital she was supposed to go to. Then something of her old clarity in crisis kicked in, she flew into the bedroom and took a large bundle of money out of her bedside table drawer, not because she had a clear idea of what need there might be for money, but because the bundle was her black-day cache. For years she'd tell me while I sat across from her at the table, "There. In the drawer. For the God-help-us days. The black days." And here we were, the black days. There had been others, but this one was clearly the worst, the time had come to open the drawer. Now she felt better, once the drawer had been opened, after all these years, in the most unexpected way.

In our family, black days were handed down the maternal line—always and without exception. My grandmother had received the black days from her mother; they'd been tucked under the bedbug-ridden mattress in a little one-room mudbrick house, knotted in a linen kerchief. I remember her, my great grandmother, she lived till I was twelve. Several times a year we'd come to pay our respects at her bedside, an encampment marked by the rank smell of urine, and there was the time when she, already plagued by dementia, delivered, with a hand resembling the princers of a praying mantis, her little bundle, while everyone around her smiled sourly. Her faded bills, in a currency that had been current in a bygone regime, trampled underfoot by later politics, but the black days were so relentless that they traversed time. I was nudged, hair neatly combed, a lace collar around my neck, closer in to her encampment where she half-sat, a braid hanging motionless down her back, so I could recite to her. After my every recited verse the old woman clapped dryly with the sides of her hands and opened her pale pink maw. Once she was gone, the

black days were lodged in the bedroom of my mother's mother. More precisely in the wardrobe, among the clothes for her funeral. The nicest clothes she had, Grandma called them her clothes for travel. That's what she'd tell me while—as if dipping a newborn into warm bath water—she'd smooth out the black sleeves of the silk blouse, and under it, as if she were dressing for a dance, she'd arrange the pleated skirt, fifteen denier nylon stockings, adding: My toes won't poke holes in these. Under the clothes wrapped in thin white paper in the recesses of the wardrobe were her black days, stowed away in a little wooden box she'd purchased at a village fair. For her black days she skimped from the gray days, from Grandpa's drink, from the scarves for his mistresses, from herself, to tuck them into the little box, as if at an altar. For us the black days were our goal, just as life was the means to that goal. She lived less and less each year, while staying at her daughter's apartment during her dotage. Prayers hummed from behind closed doors on the radio and she'd perch, trance-like, fingering the plastic beads on her rosary; there were times when she just sat and stared. Straight ahead, at the wall. She'd prop herself up on pillows and stare for hours, with an inward-looking focus, into herself, into her past life or into nothing at all. Hers was a blank stare, neither moist nor dry, almost reconciled with the moment like a tree within a forest. This was perhaps the most memorable and terrible thing that has stayed with me from her. Now it turns out that this came down to me from her, with a delay, when I reached the age of thirty. Once she'd gone, the dreaded black days found their new home in the drawer of the bedside table next to my mother's trimly tucked, well-aired bed. And there she was, reaching for them. All in one painful, trembling gesture through which coursed, like a silver thread, a slender stream of pleasure: the black days were here at last. She had been poised, waiting for them, for as long as she could remember and she was ready. There was no question whatsoever that she'd ever misremember the hospital where I'd been taken.

3,

I cannot see out the window. My eyeballs—which I'd never thought to notice before aside from when a bug or a mote of dust landed on one of them and chafed—are able to move only vertically. Among all the dimensions of the world that had been shut out of my life, my left side and my right side had vanished, gone was the luxury of rolling my eyes, so mercilessly exploited in the past, gone was the spherical sense of being enwrapped by images; the world had shrunk down to the ribbon of reality visible right here in front of me. Or above me, depending how I'd been positioned. I'd see the most when they placed me in the special wheelchair and propped me up on all sides like a rag doll that stubbornly refuses to sit properly, and they'd turn me to face the window; in its rectangle was the day. If they'd fixed my head well, so it didn't tilt too much to the side, then the narrow ribbon along which my eyes strolled, scampered, or stumbled became an endless path leading into the wild greenery of the park. I live in a castle, repurposed at the turn of the last century to become the Provincial Hospital for Ailing Children—as it was named. You'll always be my child, she tells me while she strokes my cropped, slicked-down hair. Today this baroque ghost building serves as a temporary or permanent home for people trapped in the vestibule to death, also known as the Special Hospital for Continuing Treatment and Palliative Care. Most of them here are elderly patients brought down by heart attacks and strokes. Convinced they're doing them a good turn when the weather's nice, the nurses sometimes wheel them twice up and down through a park of exotic trees and bushes, and then park them by the entrance to a building that has the words "In Knowledge Is Salvation" carved over the door. Most of the courtiers are short on both. This reminds me of the bizarre marathon runners who come together all over the world in spring. I have never understood these races run by earnest runners who are dedicating their efforts to people in wheelchairs or patients in the throes of

various diseases. There is something deeply sarcastic in such actions. I also don't find anything particularly merciful about taking seriously ill elderly people out into wild, May nature. The chasm between the garish green foliage around them and their clouded cataracts can only inflict even greater pain. I came late to a love of nature. For a long time I found it boring, and preferred to flee to the company of people, straight into the mob, I loved being close to them, I longed for them to look my way with a friendly glance, send me a nod, at least briefly. Once, when I was five, I danced before a gathering of family friends in our living room, wiggling my bottom. I wasn't aware of how suggestive my movements were, I was proud of the bugging eyes and fixated attention of the guests, until Mother, discomfited, hissed, "Enough now, out you go to play outdoors." Nature was indifferent to me, paid me no mind, in our early youth we don't understand air or water or leaves, we just hurtle into relationships.

In this lay the difference, nature came to me with you and right away we began fleeing to it precisely for its disinterest. That's when I realized that disinterest is a good thing, disinterest is not out to do us harm. The first time when we went out, we met at a park on the edge of town, that early summer is plaguing me again. The dark was coming on, pearly and blue in silhouettes, we sat side by side on a bench and if this were one of those stories, I'd say we talked in intimate and hushed tones, but since I can't talk, I'm condemned to the truth. We didn't talk about anything. We didn't know how. The time passed between us painfully, with interruptions. Still, we looked each other in the eyes with hope, stubbornly seeking answers in them, any sort of understanding. Conversation sidestepped us, we weren't using the same language, from another time and different planets, we kept stammering, attempting to reach the meaning of the encounter, the futility was poignant. Meanwhile, something deeper than thought and more real than the words uttered simply nailed us to one another, I was pared down to the space of the corner of your mouth and the flash of white tooth that broke through while you laughed, I don't know what about, I don't remember. Even before the bench, after only a few times when we met, I catapulted into the dimple on your cheek and fantasized that I was running the pad of my thumb over your shiny, black eyebrows. And

that I was pressing the space between them with my lips and feeling the tiny, invisible hairs. I surprised myself, but I was still feeling playful, still steeped in simplicity, still relatively intact. As the pearly hue of twilight slowly dulled, we relaxed under the pressure of the defeating stab at conversation and moved imperceptibly closer. The fragrance is what I'd like to bring back but it simply won't come. All that was around it does come back; it was no threat to me, it was tender, silken, almost as if it were mine so no need to feel fearful of an unfamiliar sharp tang. And besides it was folded into a cream for intensively nourishing dry skin. The next day at the drug store I tried all the creams on the shelf so I could buy yours. We leaned cheek to cheek, not too hard, I don't know where our arms or legs were, I can't remember that, I know we spent a long time moving our faces, somehow respecting each other, we touched each other with the tips of our noses, lightly along the edges of skin and hair. We didn't kiss, we were in agreement to leave that for later, another day. Without a word, this was the level of our understanding and why we stayed together. When we stood up from the bench, the day was already dark, we walked slowly off toward the center of town. We walked along the main street and almost at the same time noticed something odd. People were edging away from us. They were circumventing us far more than necessary, even though we weren't holding hands, I think we were glowing. It's easy now for us to pretend to know all about what that was, but I'd say this was our story. Our shared future. We radiated potential, thwarted from the get-go. Misfits. We betrayed form, and most of our lives were made of that, like a water-based organism. Our desires overspilled the limits of what was permissible. Our bodies betrayed us and the leaking started in all directions. Everyone edged away from us. We were unbearable. That is where nature came in. Parks, lone places in the woods, a hill above the city where a tree grew out from the ruins of a church. That is where we liked to lie, right under that tree. By then we'd started talking some. You noticed a special bug that was always flying in place, we adopted it straight away, ours. So much effort and struggle, the flapping of wings, sound, energy, all just to stay in place. We always looked for it when we stopped by there and we

always found it, it or its offspring. Mainly this species, ours, which spends all its energy just to stay in place.

I'd love to see it again, but first the tree is far away, the bug is small, and my eyes are getting tired.

4,

Waking, as if waves are washing me ashore. I don't remember the shipwreck, but my stranding on the painful, jagged crags of consciousness went on for weeks. A wave would drive me up against the rocks, I'd briefly see a flash of light, feel searing pain and my head would spin, and then the undertow would drag me down abruptly below the surface. Then I'd be suspended yet again for day in the dark belly of the ocean of the unconscious. Often, the image of her face surfaced with my pain, probably because she was standing by the bed. She'd greet me with a grim wince of horror, leaning over me and trying to yank me out. She called to me, rightly sensing I could hear her. Or that was in my past life. Lucija, why are you silent? Why won't you say anything? Speak to me, I'm your best friend, you'll never have a better one. Where are you, say something, why avoid me? I started lying to her early; she didn't catch on for years. But now when I wanted to scream the truth, on the best days my voice box produced only a sigh a little like a choke. My silence had turned against me and chose to exact its revenge for all the times I'd exploited it. I couldn't bear the look of disappointment; it's because I don't like meat, so I'd chew it until it turned it to a gray sponge and then I'd spit it into my napkin, yummy, Mama; it's because she was always sad that on my way to school I'd splash in the puddles on purpose, I'd dream up lies to cheer her up, a little dog peed on my foot, isn't it funny, look, Mama, how wet it is; it's because I liked boys more than her so she'd slap me when she spotted a white stain on my pants in the dirty laundry, I not with anybody, Mama, you reek of sex, Lucija, you're letting them jack off on you; it's because I outdid her son and lied about it, he's only a little special, Mama. I'd only just moved out, she hadn't spoken with me for weeks, though the little apartment I rented was only a ten-minute walk from hers. She sobbed over the phone. Then I stopped by every evening around six, after work. "Here, this is what I'm having for supper." She'd push me over a bowl of porridge

and in it a mashed banana. “I no fan of bananas, but when I mash it in, the oatmeal’s easier to get down.” This was not about the porridge, or the banana, or the supper, it was about her pride at feeling miserable, and something she was confusing with humility. It was about taking masochistic pleasure at making life hell, even at the rare moments when it wasn’t. I imagined knocking the porcelain bowl out of her hand and the porridge dribbling down the walls. And then I’d simply smile and say: “So fine, it’s good for you, Mama,” Now it dribbles straight into me, and I guess this is retribution. The catheter was wormed in through my nose, wriggled down my throat and all the way to my stomach and there it pours the food in so I don’t die of hunger. A brownish liquid high in nutrients which, counter to every natural law, is keeping my body alive. I have never liked eating. Now they feed me constantly. Tubes connected to a pump pour a substrate into me at regular intervals all day long.

When I was small, eating felt like a huge waste of time, except when I was eating something sweet, the only kind of food I liked. Sweet things were enjoyable and safe, there was never something animal surfacing in a sweet dish, I could not bear the thought that I was chewing somebody’s ligament, that there might be someone’s cartilage snapping under my teeth, that the feather follicles from somebody’s former wings were poking into my palate. Instantly my stomach would churn and my gorge would rise. I left the room while Grandpa with his big stubbled jaw chomped on head cheese, while someone’s hoofs and organs quivered inside the transparent cube of oily gelatinous aspic. During the days in the autumn when pigs are slaughtered, I went down to the end of the street wrapped in a thick shawl and kicked around in other people’s back yards so I could avoid seeing the torrents of blood caught in the plastic tub as it gushed from the upside down, hanging pig. The smell of cooking pig brains overrode all else in supreme horror and spread throughout the neighborhood. I was flabbergasted by how hunks of that one slaughtered hog could keep turning up for a full year. It didn’t seem big enough when it hung there in the yard, but the amount of meat seemed to grow, it filled the freezers of kin near and far, no matter how much bacon we eat we can never eat it all, another slab would turn up, there were always cracklings to munch on at dinner. In this

meat-eating family I was the butt of subtle mockery, I'd sit over a bowl of soup for hours, like little islands in it were swimming duck's giblets, and my tears dripped on their gentle slopes. They couldn't understand me, and I was incapable of explaining this to them, I ate as much as I could, and when it couldn't go down, I'd cry. I don't remember that anyone ever asked me, would you prefer something else instead? About the time I started school they took me to the doctor. My eating disorder was explained furtively, the way shameful, secret things are talked about in a family. The doctor was old, dry, he had bad breath when he leaned vulture-like over my tiny frame. Into my mouth he pushed a wooden stick, with the hard callouses of his thumbs he roughly drew down the skin under my eyes, he pinched me on my lower arms, and all the while he wore a sneer on his purple lips. Mama stood in the corner of the doctor's shabby office and with every muscle on her face she was abject in her apology. The long-anticipated diagnosis came out in two sentences: "She's small. And too lazy to chew." He tossed the stick into a metal cup, on it the word 'used,' and once more he slapped my face. "So what should we do?" my mother asked almost flirtatiously. "Nothing," answered the doctor indifferently, "she'll catch on in time." And so it was. This was one of the first habits that settled like oil in the pit of my stomach, creating room for all the others to follow.

I soon started first grade, and the room expanded for my freedom to maneuver when choosing what I would allow into my mouth, as did the room for my lies. Nobody watched over me in school. My school day alternated each week: one week our class met in the morning, and the next week we'd be in school in the afternoon. In the weeks of afternoon school, when their shifts at work meant I was alone at home in the morning, I savored the warm buns and yogurt, and the possibility of picking out from between the two slices of bread the thick slices of stringy salami with my fingers and delivering them to the waste basket. It made me happy to see how they plopped in among the scraps of paper and the pencil shavings. But the next week, when my brother was at home to see me off to morning school, my stomach would already start aching early. Seven years older than me, he made us our breakfast. "Eat," he'd bark at me, coldly playing at authority. The hotdogs lay there steaming on the little plate and I'd start my whimpering.

“Eat, stupidhead!” and then he’d be louder and louder, while I was sniveling all over my clothes in sobs and gasps. “You will not move until you eat it,” he’d practice on me with grim satisfaction as if he were a grown-up, like a greedy puppy licking shoes with a toxic feeling of power, while at the same time popping a third of the hotdog into his mouth. “Eat!” he’d yell then and he’d and whack the plate in front of me so the hotdog bounced up and dropped, rubber-like, back into the plate. I stared at the floor, drenching my neck, chest, clean, ironed shirt.

“So you won’t, eh? Open up!” Once he tried to jam the pink meat through my clenched teeth. After pinioning my arms on my back with his big hand he sat on me. I held him off in this battle for a few seconds, but when I ran out of air I reflexively opened my mouth and he shoved the fork partway down my throat. I started to choke and cough, his grip released, and having pulled free, I fled from the table. Then, after I’d coughed up what was in my mouth and rage replaced my fear, I uttered for the first time the only two words I could muster: “Cunt fag.” I had no idea what either of these meant, my face beet red, my eyes swollen, I grabbed my school bag and raced out of the apartment. Tomislav stood there in the middle of the dining room, his empty fork pointed to the sky, and laughed. When I came back, nobody said a word about it. That evening I couldn’t fall asleep for the longest time, I called to Mama while she was talking on the phone in the hall. Softly and persistently, pleading with her to come and sit next to me till I fell asleep. I dreamed of her face leaning over mine and stroking me with her hand, I wished that this would always be the first thing I’d see every morning when I woke.

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She's always scheduling you for Tuesday appointments at 11:00. That's how I imagined you, today while the doctor was making her rounds, when she asked the two medical students with her: "Is today Tuesday?", the girl said nothing; the boy answered, "Yes, today's only Tuesday." Only. I've already been processed. Two pairs of strong hands in the early morning shift me adeptly to a cot parked on the right side of the bed where I live, a strong man and an even stronger woman. They immobilize my head with a splint, I don't open my eyes, I pretend to doze, which is how I find their unnatural closeness easier to stomach. The woman is above my head, I'm already familiar with the way the wrinkles on her neck merge in the plunge toward her big, wilted breasts, the gold chain necklace with biggish Christ on the cross dangling toward my head, it swings over my shaggily cut hair and never touches me. She shoves her meaty hands under my armpits, firmly clasps my torso, skillfully arranges the tubes of the respirator and catheters, says "Hey," and glances over at her colleague who is down by my feet. Her breath smells of tobacco and cheap Turkish coffee, I like inhaling it, I nourish myself with smells like these, the only tastes still available to me. My nightgown is hip length to make performing the hygiene of my body all the simpler, they do not change my clothes every day here, even though the doctor did once give a little talk to a group of students about how devastating the depersonalization of patients such as myself can be, the vital importance of human dignity which must be preserved by dressing the patient every day in clothing the patient likes best, attuned to their style and personality. I always liked short skirts, the casual kind over Doc Marten high-tops; I loved pretty dresses, long and flowing, stovepipe jeans, comfy knitted sweaters, bare shoulders, a slender waist, lots of shoes, boots, sandals. Now I have this short nighty and purple faded slippers, crocs, which someone brought me, they're mostly there next to the bed because someone made off with my floral

slip-ons that were sort of like orthopedic clogs, the ones Mama brought me. Not that I needed them, I won't be running away in them any time soon, but they were holding the defense lines for me in my valiant fight against depersonalization. When I was rolled out into nature, they'd put on my slip-ons. "Hey," says the medical technician and they hoist me in no time over to the other bed like a sack of wet cement. They roll me over onto my hip, and there is an arm—I don't know whose—stabilizing me gently, because, I assume, otherwise I'd roll off. For an instant my gaze is aimed at my bed and on it, before the nurse gathers up the first layer of dirty bedding from the plastic sheet, I can see brown stains. They look as if they're regularly spaced a little like a snow angel, where the arms, the hips and the legs go. Maybe it's bed sores, maybe the stigmata, maybe he touched me after all. Today is not the day for bathing, today is only a rub-down with a washcloth, applying ointments and lotions, a declarative insertion of a stiff, frayed toothbrush into the oral cavity and giving the slicked-down brown hair a brush. Then back into the white snow to leave my tracks there again. Out of the whole morning procedure, I least like it when they talk to me, when they actually address me, so that's why I've developed the defense of feigning sleep, though they probably guess that I'm awake. But to deal with their "Now there we go!", "My, my, you're going to smell as fresh as a baby," "Will you look at her, you're good as new!" means being planted sovereignly on the throne of humiliation. When they move me back onto the bed, their part is done, and until the rounds and the physical therapist after that, nobody comes by. Though I feign sleep, they crank the bed up into a different position, I cautiously open one eye, they're still pottering around the room. Once, while there was still a second bed in the other corner, two of the caretakers showed up in the room. "The room of the woman who can't move," Prepping the bed to move it, they took it to pieces. They didn't notice me watching, but I saw how on my legs, which were covered by a sheet, they'd lined up their screw drivers, wrenches, a spray bottle. They picked them up and put them back on me, I breathed to myself.

Now, when the doctor makes her rounds, I can no longer keep my eyes shut, I stare ahead and every so often the medical students and their professor swim into view. They observe me intently, the boy

with a shade more audacity and a tinge of fascination. The professor who comes to the ward once a week is leading a new tour, all she's missing is one of those tour-guide red umbrellas. The group stops a few feet from me, out of courtesy, as if I won't hear them or as if I didn't subscribe to the educational program. "This one's rare, I told you about it before, the syndrome of a person who has locked themselves away, our term for it is: the *locked-in syndrome*. It is recognized as a permanent vegetative state following upon a traumatic brain injury. It usually comes about as a consequence of hemorraghing in the pons or a brain ischemic insult that disturbs and damages the areas of the brain that mediate the horizontal gaze." Then she stops briefly, comes over to me and pulls the sheet up higher, toward my breasts. For a time she watches me, then she steps away from the bed and continues in a conspiratorial tone:

"The patients have preserved cognitive function and they can be awake, they open their eyes, and they have a preserved cycle of waking and sleeping. They can't move the lower part of their face, chew, swallow, speak, breathe, or move their limbs. Vertical eye movements are possible; they can open and close their eyes and blink a certain number of times in answer to questions. The diagnosis is primarily clinical. An MRI of the brain helps us search for what precipitated it and shows us any changes over time. The EEG findings are normal both in a waking state or in normal sleep phases." All three of them stare at me, on purpose I refuse to blink, I am using every ounce of strength not to think of how to communicate with them. I am calm and glass-like, maybe I'm dead, maybe the two medical students will die, maybe the boy will be run over by a car. The professor opens the door, lets her group out in front of her, her clogs clatter on the linoleum, and she talks on freely, professionally, excited by the rare jewel she's leaving behind in the room until the next time, and she says: "The mortality rate is high, many who suffer from this die within a month. Recovery to independent function is rare, but possible within the first few months when the precipitating factors are partially reversible, such as with tetraplegia resulting from Guillain-Barré syndrome. Positive diagnostic indicators include early recovery of lateral eye movements and detection of evoked responses after magnetic stimulus of the motor cortex. Patients up to the age of eighteen have been

known to survive this syndrome of being locked up inside their own body. She has been here about three months." They are all quite excited, the last such specimen was treated at Rebro Hospital in the mid-1990s but he didn't live this long. Now the female medical student asks quickly and boldly: "Is she being treated for anything? What does her treatment focus on?" Without engaging emotionally, but still quite caring, the professor continues: "We treat to prevent systemic disorders such as pneumonia, urinary tract infections, we monitor the feeding tube, do what we can to minimize bed sores and pursue physical therapy to prevent contracture. Logopedists have been able to help establish a communication link using the blinking of the eyes. Because the cognitive function is unimpaired, patients should be making their own decisions about medical treatment if communication can be established. Of course our possibilities here are quite limited. Her mother visits and was put through the training so at some point, if her condition remains stable, she can be moved to home treatment. But this has so far been a rough ride, the improvements have not been major." Her voice faded into the distance, replaced by the ticking of the wall clock across from my bed, the time was only ten, only Tuesday.

You are already standing now at the central train station, although all you need is fifteen minutes to get to the hospital, you come a half hour before your 11:00 appointment you're never able to be late. You board the commuter rail train, sit across from a woman, mostly across from women, men continue to unnerve you, you study her face, clothing, the way she's holding her bag and you understand everything. How anxious she is about returning home, what her husband looks like, if she has children. Is she sad, shallow, indifferent. You've always known, you had to if you were to survive, since your youngest years you've been forced to study human nature. You maneuvered your way through the labyrinth of other peoples' expectations, moods and quirks so you could get by as unremarked as possible, and when that wasn't possible, you'd adapt to the point of self-erasure, an internal dying. Your painstakingly acquired skills delighted me, and then we'd play diagnosis, most often while we were on public transportation, you told me stories about the people sitting around us. Once in the train, though the time I had the impression

you were less certain, you indicated a boy who was sitting kitty corners from us. Nodding in his direction you mouthed: “He’s my colleague,” with warmth, but also with a tinge of disdain, and I sometimes caught something deeply hidden. The young man you were showing me was in his early twenties, and though diminutive in stature, he looked like all the young men around here, ordinary and unassuming, crew cut, wearing a roomy short-sleeved shirt, jeans, and sneakers. “How do you know?” I asked, surprised. “By the way he moves his hands,” you said. I still didn’t get it, and then I saw how his fingers were pinching his tee shirt and pulling it away from his belly, as if he were too warm though he wasn’t, and then the slight hunch to his back, he glanced around and with this specific gesture eliminated any suggestion of space between his chest and the flat surface of his tee shirt. “There, that’s what they all do.”

You knew better than anyone what gestures tell, what’s going on when someone eyes you, how the young men with shaved heads in the park walk when they come over to bum a cigarette and how they walk when they come for you. Those were the long ago days when I knew little, almost nothing, about them while we were on the train on our way to the hospital, like you’re maybe doing today. And though there’s no longer any reason to, I know you still travel as if invisible, as if wrapped in a magic cloak, often with dark glasses. Though your beautiful narrow—almost noble—face is hard to ignore, your large dark eyes, your striking curved eyebrows, your pale skin and the shining mid-brow furrows of pain, like when you concentrate, furrows that easily switch to brightness and something rascally when a corner of your lips pulls into a smile. In your thirties, slender and good-looking with the old-fashioned poise of a fencer, you look a little younger, spry yet melancholy, joining extremes and from this always emerge things people don’t know how to describe so they call them beauty. That you are so beautiful, as I only realized later, was bound to make you a special quarry for the rest of humankind. The aura of perplexity shimmering around you until you surfaced from yourself in the last period of our life together, until you’d adapted your body to the boy who’d been crouching in the brightest darkness of your soul for some twenty years, had affected people in two different ways. The first group was drawn by the resonance of the exotic—unthreatening yet

inflammatory—as if they were standing at the zoo in front of the cage of a magnificent Bengal tiger while secure in their knowledge that they'd remain unscathed; they knew they could toy from their superior position with this unknown, potentially dangerous thing, and, most important, they could step away whenever they felt like it. You didn't matter. The tiger didn't matter. The cage didn't matter. A few, a subset of this larger group, flaunted their friendship with you on their lapel like a medal, to show off to their less progressive friends, elevating their importance in society. By socializing with you they decided to bedeck themselves with the accolade of benefactor, holding you to be a dear ignoramus who will know how to show your gratitude. They, too, could step away whenever they felt like it. Again, you didn't matter. The second group, the ones you saw as less dangerous but potentially more aggressive than the first, were outraged by your aura, a single glance at you, which might show them some of the complexity of your being, was enough to prod them to revulsion and panic. The very fact of your existence gutted the image of their narrow world, in which nothing that isn't like them can exist or survive, indeed, the world for them exists only if it's exactly like them. They feared you with a divine fury, like a punishment arriving in the form of a disease, as if this heralded their end, and they were prepared to do everything to destroy you. But now this is all in the past, the gazes toward you are benevolent these days although you still carry your shield, you also carry scars on your soul as you step off the train platform, go down into the underpass, and walk toward the Vrapče psychiatric hospital. The arborway and the benches lining the path are charming, there is something soothing in that walk toward the always open iron gate of the institution for treatment of an array of psychiatric disorders.

Though the first time we went there together, I cried the whole way. You held me by the hand and almost pulled me toward the building, my steps were leaden and with my whole heart I wished I could run away, but somehow I kept up with you. I was ashamed of my weakness, I was scared of everything, even the wrecks sitting on the benches, and all I could think of was Mother. What would she say if she saw me now, what would she say if she knew of the secret I was hiding. You were quiet and pulled me along, I don't

know how you made it through it all, and your persistence always won me over, but once we'd made it to the door to the doctor's office, I calmed down somehow. Soon a petite woman with short blond hair and kind, bright eyes came out. She greeted us briefly, asking us to wait a little until she'd finished with her students. This sent me again into a crying jag. I don't know why exactly, except perhaps that the students would be talking about us. We walked out holding cigarettes that were wet and gluey with slobber and tears. And then, from behind our backs, a scrawny, transparent pajama-clad arm thrust out through the bars and there it swayed gently. "Give me, give me one. Pretty puhleeeeease…" the older woman pled repeatedly in her hoarse voice. In soundless steps she moved all the way over to the window so her underarm was pressed against the iron cage. Her gray hairs wafted off her head, and her papery, furrowed face remained in the shadow. We looked at each other, startled, unable to decide what made more sense at this moment, in this world, in this life: an act of mercy that frees the pleas and leads to uncertainty, or the eternally secure jail. I don't know whether you are remembering this as you stand there today in the waiting room, I believe that Irena now opens the door for you immediately, you've known each other for several years by now, and though you haven't seen each other for a while, maybe it's my locked-in condition that has taken you back to her. "How are you?" she asks. You say nothing. She fills the void. "Have you been to see her?" and gently, with no trace of pathos, she cuts to the chase. She's like that. You still aren't saying anything, but this time you shake your head, perpendicular to the direction my eyes can move. Left, right, and the bodily fluid for moistening the cornea pours down your face. But you're brave, you'll find the crack through which the words will seep, just as they did that morning when we finally stepped into the doctor's office. That's when I first heard you talk about *it*.

"I remember a scene I've never spoken about to a soul in my life. I was quite small. Maybe five or six… I was home alone and I came across a tennis ball. And I was really interested to see how my underpants would look so I slipped it right in and saw how nicely it fit. I remember that feeling, I think I'll never forget how terrific that was. Suddenly strength hummed through my body. As if I'd hooked up my

main battery, if we think of ourselves as machines. Or, as if you've never had a center of balance and then suddenly you do. Mainly, this is something elemental. And after that comes the shame. Like after ninety percent of the things you do and want in life. The body, our worst hell. More or less... Everything is fine while you're small. Nobody can tell, when you're on the beach in summer you're wearing a boy's swimming trunks and everything's fine. But what matters is to know that in the game with the kids, in walking around on the beach, in absolutely every appearance and action, you know you're lying! And then, again, the shame because your crew sees through you. And then the worst part, when the kids start asking questions, and why'd you say your name is Ivan? And everything you'd built, or rather didn't build but got by being natural, by being naturally male, comes tumbling down. That instant it's gone, and then who are you? And absolutely nobody understands, but instead, to make matters worse, they ply you with those idiotic questions: 'Hey, Dora! Why so glum? How come you've been saying your name is Ivan? Oh, dear God...' Then the rage starts to mount inside you, the anger, the grief, a huge hole that won't stop spreading. And still does today. And after all this Granddad shows up who is an absolutely tactless, insensitive type who prods you where it hurts the most. Without letting up. We sit in the room and watch the RTL top list of the ten weirdest people in the world. 'Granddad, what does hermaphrodite mean?' I ask and he looks down at me from above, and says: 'You.' Dad's not there. Always away. At work or I don't remember where. Mother is indefatigably edgy or she's fine but with the overtones of 'I'll be fine for your sake,' because I'm your mother and I have to be fine for you and I will subordinate everything to you. And I'm sad. Nothing can be held against her on that count because the situation clearly wasn't good. And besides, whatever, only they really know. That's all I can manage now because I'm not well myself."

27,

Duje is bare-chested. He's wearing cut-off Bermuda jean shorts, hairy legs, a big bulge in the crotch, trim, his well-tanned body shows only barely visible signs of aging. Not so his face what with the drinking, smoking, carousing and partying, the wrinkles incised around his mouth, crowsfeet of laughter around his eyes, vivacious black eyes and a tousled mane over bushy eyebrows. When he comes out onto the terrace, everyone looks over at him, here's someone older and tougher than you. He gestures with his long arms and totes cans of beer and charcoal for the grill. Always before Duje makes his entrance there's a dismembering of animals. Hey, godammit, what're ya'll drinking, what'll we throw on the grill, took me three solid days to sober up, I installed two air-conditioners in the bedroom, holy mother'a God, remember how we were, like, totally hammered—this is the trajectory along which he paces up and down, shouting out lines that stop you cold. He doesn't spot me yet, I'm sitting in a corner, I'm not naked and sweaty, I'm not taking up any more space than I need, I'm just watching and learning. Still, when he sees me, a connection is established instantaneously. In this connection there's nothing of substance, but he proffers a hand to me clearly, resolutely, with full recognition and respect. When he meets you for the first time, he studies you as if you're a beautiful and precious box, interesting because he finds it pretty, but he has no clue what he'll find inside. That's how Duje is with all women. He cannot deal with these things. He doesn't function without the "hey" and the "godammit" and the "took me three solid days to sober up" and so then there she goes, mother'a God, going on about "it's high time you take the kid to the doctor, when're you picking him up at day care, where's the groceries, were y'thinkin' we'd wait the whole livelong day for you to get outta the goddamn bed, and me with my head pounding." So he knows right off the bat that mine is pounding, too, as soon as he starts in about his wife he winks conspiratorially and asks me: "Whatcha

drinking, man?" "Rakija," I say, "What have you got?" "We've got it all, my friend, all of it! I was worried I'd end up with these bamboo cocktail things, heaven help me!" and then he turns to you and your friend we visited on the coast, Duje's childhood friend. Their friendship dates back to discovering the world, before they'd taken on their life roles, and that's a special kind of friendship we have with people we'd never hang out with if we'd met them as grownups, because grown-up friendships are often friendships about performance. She rolls her eyes, Lordy Duje, then you smile, and I accept this friend, I understand him pretty well, I despise him, I'm sickened by his simple world and the space he takes up, I ogle him with admiration, I want to be him, or if not him, then his best friend. You look at me in surprise, I feel it. We start chugging rakijas, Duje is getting louder, I'm getting louder, too, you, so goes it, are getting quiet. That's how this works. Duje plays music on his cell phone, he plays Springsteen, Depeche Mode, some Roma musicians who rip his heart out, he's curious within his limits, certain that he'll never be aware that he is. Therein lies the safety, a certain level of unawareness, ignorance, a lack of grasp of the fears of the world, the height of the sky and depths of the seas, the fact that we are all of us afloat in an unhearing universe. He runs the show, he leads the way in capturing the audience with his boisterous behavior, interrupting others when they speak, then spinning countless tales that include life on the edge because of a great mindlessness and brashness spurred by booze, and when we all succumb to the performance he's putting on for us, when we all give up taking an equal part in the conversation, then comes the commentary. The commentary begins at about two o'clock in the morning. Duje's life wisdom has an answer for all dilemmas, the girls from the terrace wander off to bed, but you stay with me to shield me with your fear, you don't want to abandon me if you're not comfortable, but I'd like to trust him, I'd like you to go. I have this crazy desire to pull off my shirt and turn his sense of security to ash, I want to offer my comments to him. On the other hand I still cannot get used to the magic of my new beginning, that Duje from Podstrana sees me as an equal, I want you to disappear for a minute so Duje and I can have our little man-to-man talk, you have no idea how I've dreamed of this. Instead, the evening goes on as follows.

Duje gives his blessing: “Ah, you’re a good guy, you are… like my buddy Željko, skinny as a rail but the man can put away drink like an animal.” Duje admires me, my special human qualities that keep me on my feet longer than any bull his size. Duje has no clue that I’ve been drinking since seventh grade and learned to be too much so I’d never be too little to anybody. I drink then I go to the park, I look out for the shaved-head guys before they come looking for me. When I go over to their bench, first they’re confused, then they laugh at me, then they can’t figure out where I belong, so I smash a bottle on the concrete, I howl, I cackle, I must be even crazier, only then will they leave me alone, a crazy man who has nothing to lose is a threat to no one. As part of the commentary, when the three of us are left on the terrace, Duje starts getting curious. “So hey, are the two of you shacked up?” “No, we’re not living together.” You answer tersely and nervously, while I keep track of what’s happening inside the huge skull, I have a good view of the translation playing out in his head. “Hey, Asti, so whatcha waiting for?” Duje keeps it simple while he uncorks the second bottle of rakija and pours us generous glassfuls. His gaze moves indecisively from you to me and then he addresses me as if you’re not there. How many conversations at this very moment are underway around the world in the presence of a woman as if she’s not there. “So, bud, listen closely, if this is it, and I’d bet it is, what a looker she is, no point to stop to think about this. Off you two go to bed, dip your spoon into that honeypot of hers and give it a stir, and it’ll be like God’s gift. I ran away for a long time, y’know, none of them’ll gonna catch me, and then I got Renata in the family way, and when that little devil was born, do you know what a joy that is?! When he climbs into bed with me at six o’clock in the morning, and starts stomping around on my head with his little feet, God help us, I’m a happy man. And she’s happy enough, though she’s forever grumbling, sniveling and smashing things over some crap, but you know women, that’s what they do, she wouldn’t want to be without me. I was this beast of a man, nobody could stop me, they know me from one end of town to the other, three hundred people came to my wedding, and it’s not that I’ve stopped going out, I haven’t but anything more than that doesn’t interest me. And when I have a free weekend, and the three of us go to Kaufland, buy us a mess of ćevaps, meat, then she cooks everything

up so nice, I throw myself into the grilling, we go down to the terrace, the kid kicks a ball around the yard, Daddy, look at me, ain't nothin' better'n that. So I'm telling you, bud," and he winks once more, "you just go put your spoon in her honeypot stir it up, she ain't gonna be sorry." And then just to be polite he turns at you, "Am I right or am I right?" You shake your head absently, and he says, "Hey, Duje ain't no fool, I know what I'm saying." As you get up from the table, as the tin leg of your chair scrapes furiously on the concrete, you glare at me in rage and disbelief, or, as Duje would put it, ah, women, gotta love'em. "I'm off to bed, good night." You turn and leave, and I glance back once more, longingly. Is this a scene from the underworld? Who'll be turning to dust, you or I? I come along after you. "I'll just give it a few more minutes," winks Duje and stays behind, alone.

We sleep on a mattress in a little room, you have already put out the light and turned your back, I grab you around the waist, something else is carrying me along, I pull you to me, you go all stiff, come over here and let me give your honeypot a stir with my spoon, I whisper in your ear, and you just answer, God, what an dumbass. I hear him sluicing the stuff down his gullet, not ten feet away, pouring glass after glass of rakija into that bottomless pit, and although at first glance the world is tailored to his measure, something seems not quite right. It's hard for him to think about this, so he pours himself another, then whatever is chafing and scratching at him goes dull, he pours because otherwise he couldn't stomach this life, the Kaufland and the ćevaps, the sobbing and the hysterics, the chasm of misunderstanding between his feeling of who he is and the life he's living. Duje ain't no fool, once he'd cared to understand, once he seemed to, but that was so long ago, back when they were childhood friends, that brief time when we were at least a little untainted and could be what we were. That's why he sighs, why he goes out, why he howls and drinks, why he doesn't feel much, he needs those two A/C units, aside from the little feet that jump around on his head, because the secret lies in the fact that they haven't yet stepped into their role. My buddy Duje, how can I say that he is endlessly dear to me, how can I convey all this to you, I'm more than what I keep to myself, and you are more than being angry.

31,

I could have managed without the two of them. I could have traveled, I could have seen the world, I could have gone to school, if only someone had showed me the way, I wasn't stupid. I could, like Zdenka, have given birth at thirty, I'd have had the time. I could have left him a hundred times, I could've, but I didn't. Because of the two of them. And I could have done without them. Now everything's too late, and even if it weren't, I still don't know how, I still can't remember myself, I don't know who I was before, before all of them, I don't know what I like, I don't know what I'm good at, I don't know what brings me joy, so I endure with what I became afterward.

I scrub the inside of the radiator with a long brush, I vacuum daily, I polish the ceiling lamp inside and out, after that I sit on the floor so as not to spoil the sofa cover and check to see if there's a speck of dust left somewhere, it always finds where to settle in, like along the decoration on the side of the lamp. I'm expecting them any minute. Let them think this is who I am, they'll find it easier that way. Though they know nothing of how I became this way. I am nineteen. I give birth to a son. His skin smells of the forest and honey, but when I look at him, he looks more like an earthworm to me. He's all red and wrinkly, skinny and gangly, and I can't believe this came out of me and I'm not sure what to do with it. They let me see him briefly, I didn't even know how to hold him, and after they took him to the nursery, they forgot me. They left me to lie in the corridor of the hospital, it was overcrowded, a lot of women were having babies, they'd finished and forgotten me. I lay there, legs splayed, covered only by a thin sheet, good Lord, I gave birth to a child, laughter comes over me, I gave birth, and maybe I'd laugh if I weren't feeling the throbbing down there, first a sharp and then a dull pain. I'm ashamed to call out to anyone. The nurses hurry by down the corridor, nobody notices me, the doctor is nowhere to be seen. If I call them, I'm afraid they'll

give me a piece of their mind. It feels as if hours have already passed, the blood on the sheet is crusting darker, my thighs are taut because it's drying. I muster the courage and call down the corridor: "Excuse me, excuse me!" I prop myself up on my elbows, and a fresh stream of blood gushes from my birth canal. The nurse turns at the last minute before disappearing around another corner, and it's as if she's suddenly reminded of something: "Oh, that's you, why didn't you give us a shout! Uh oh, we haven't stitched you up and now you're cooling off!" She hurries to me, calls her colleague over and they roll me back into the operating theater. The doctor comes quickly, with a hand he lifts the sheet, has a look, frowns, and as if to himself, says: "Why'd we wait so long?" Nobody explains a thing to me, not that they'd cut me, nor that they'd cut into my birth canal so they'd have an easier time during the birth, they used to say it was to keep the woman from tearing, and even less that they'd stitch me up hours later, after the wound had gone cold, and they'd do it without anesthetic. Cut and stitch. As if this were a piece of cloth, nobody asks you. My eyes are bulging out, my teeth clenched, I count each needle prick, there have been six already, when the doctor slaps me on the thigh and says; "As good as new, I even tightened her up a bit, her husband owes me a bottle of cognac!"

I'm lying in a room with six other women, I've forgotten all about the earthworm, I can see my husband on the other side of the street, waving to me. In one hand he's holding a bouquet of flowers, in the other, a cigarette. He strokes my face while we sit in his brother's car. He tenderly dips his other hand down between my legs, so tenderly that it makes my head spin, and whispers in my ear, "You're mine, I want you more than anybody, just say yes. We'll stay for a little while at my folks' place, and then on we'll go wherever we like, we can leave here, we could go to Germany." They didn't let him in, so outside he circled the ward, hoping to call to me through the window. I can see he was out carousing last night, I see he's happy and tired, he's a father, nobody cut him with no anesthetic, they didn't yank out his placenta, he's twenty-two, he knows even less about life than I do. I already know something isn't right. Every cell of my being is warning me about this, to be fair it has always been warning me, but now I fear there's no

going back. I walk around like a drafting compass, after three days, I can't bear to sit on the toilet seat, when I push I think my gut will come tumbling out, the bleeding won't stop. He is a father and all he does is shut himself in with the newspaper and besides he pushes loudly, he sits like that for ten minutes, enjoys himself, while I'm afraid to lean over. Nobody ever told me anything, except these broad threats, like, you'll see when you give birth.

We live with his parents. His mother wants me to call her Mama. I can't bear to say it. Now I, too, am a mama. It doesn't feel real yet. I'd rather crawl back inside my own mother, but I push this thought away before the tears well in my eyes. So be it, how else can it be. After seven days I manage a bowel movement, I sob in the outhouse toilet, I'm sick at the thought of someone hearing me, even just the seat creaking, I'm ashamed before all of them, especially his old man. He paces in the yard back and forth with his arms on his back, curses, rarely whistles through the gap in his front teeth. He shoots me a sideways look. In the evening his mother brings a wash basin into the room they share, she kneels in front of the old man and his ankles are a sickly white and swollen, shot through with burst capillaries and pimples from ingrown hairs. The water in the wash basin gives off steam, his old man hisses that it's too hot, and then he says to me: "Hey, kid, come over here, devil take ye." I'm not sure what he wants, I set the baby in the cradle. His mother is banging around the kitchen with pots and my young husband has gone out. "What do you need?" I say softly, and he leers: "Old granddad can't bend over any more, could you lend a hand." He wants me to wash his feet, I never even did that for my father, I stand there, mid-stride in the mildewed dining room, mid-stride between kneeling at the old man's feet, scrubbing his soles of thick callous like a horse's hooves, and the cradle where the little lump of life that came out of me is groaning, mid-stride between myself and the new role in life they'd always been preparing me for. My soul dries and I feel like throwing up as I come over to the cracked wash basin, I'm not sure why I'm here, I can't remember the caresses that brought me here, and a minute before I'll plunge my hands into the hot water the old man's feet are soaking in, my young husband opens the door. Cold air comes into the room along with his

confusion. I look at his face and I feel humiliated, though my humiliation comes from his father, I always take the shame upon myself. “What are you doing?” he asks sternly, though a little sadly, as if this were all my idea. He is not without feelings, he’s just weak, first he’s a son, and only then a husband, father or lover. They didn’t raise him right, so he doesn’t know whether to yank my hands out of the hot water, the red fingers that only a year before had held a cigarette, lipstick the color of meat, and the cover to the Stones album he’d given me as our ticket to the places we’d be going away to. “Come, I need you for something.” He barely says the words, his feeble urgency is only because his words have at least a little weight as they are spoken by a husband. I stand up obediently, choosing whom I’ll be servant to. Granddad doesn’t say anything, he’s scowling because he has been left without the touch of nineteen-year-old hands on his wrinkled hooves, so in a raspy voice he shouts, irritated: “Old Woman, come over here, devil take ye!” My young husband pulls me out into the narrow hallway and instead of an explanation for the place he’s brought me to, instead of an apology and us packing our suitcases that very night, even if we have to go right out into the fucking night, we’ll take the earthworm if we have to, he plants a moist kiss on my mouth. My young husband, stupid boy. He shuts me up and kisses me, touches my breasts from which droplets are starting to drip, black stains spreading on the brown blouse. Just then the earthworm cries and disappointment stings my belly. I take the child, he vanishes, and what remains is a night interrupted by the baby’s cries, the old man’s groans from behind a plywood partition and my occasional nod off into shallow sleep. Day still hasn’t broken, and I rinse diapers in icy water from a frozen faucet, and then boil them on the stove in a big pot. Before that I scrubbed the rag rug from the kitchen and left it on the line to drip. The woman gets up after me, clatters around in the yard in her wooden clogs and farts loudly. I never heard my mother do that. She splashes her face at the faucet and then blows her nose with two fingers and flicks the snot into the garden. With the same fingers she checks the rag rug on the line and when she sees that it hasn’t drained enough yet, she pulls it down and heaves it at my wash basin with the sterilized

diapers. They all tip over onto the concrete. “Have you no hands?” She walks around behind me while I clean the house, licks her fingers and nabs the dust balls. Little Miss Dirty No Hands.

Every day, no matter what I do. I take the ladder and climb up to the ceiling light, I wrap a soft microfiber cloth around my finger and with it I wipe away the stripe of dust, pain sears through my knee, my back, I’m almost fifty, little is left, Little Miss Dirty No Hands. And the two of them think I like cleaning.