Lora Tomaš

Salt Dark

– Notes from the Islands –

Translated from Croatian by Mirna Čubranić

Prologue

When the old man tapped the top shelf with his cane as if he were shaking a fruit tree, and two Mikado chocolate bars with rice tumbled to the floor, the shopkeeper grumbled, picked them up and dropped them into his trolley bag. It already held three Adria Mare tins of sardines with vegetables (his supper), a loaf of bread (hard as stone, he complained when he felt it in his hand four minutes earlier), and a plastic cup of thick yogurt nearing the expiration date, that was on discount that morning and cost half a kuna less than usual (which is why he took it).

– When exactly did sour cream change its name and surname? – the old man asked.

– It didn't, young gentleman. This has always been thick yogurt – the shopkeeper replied.

– But I haven't come for yogurt. Take it out of my sight. – The old man pushed the yogurt away, and the shopkeeper, as he himself told me later, rolled his eyes for the umpteenth time that week.

On his way out, the old man carefully pulled his trolley over the slightly elevated doorstep, one small wheel at a time.

– If one of them fell off, that would be the death of me – he said through clenched teeth and turned towards me, who was sitting on a bench, with my back against the wall of the store, writing down his words in the notebook on my lap.

He was lame in his right leg and blind in his left eye, with broad, defiant nostrils. Stooping, short. One of the two widowers, the more handsome one by his own assessment, on the island with seven widows. But no, it doesn't mean that the two of them have options, he can't laugh now although he would like to, because he will get stomach cramps again and, again, will refuse to call the doctor, as he already knows what she will prescribe – antibiotics, like the last time. He will tell me all about the more recent history of the island, because he can still see rather well out of his good eye, and his ears serve him just fine, but first, do I know what the Arabs asked Indians?

What shall we put after the number nine? they asked. And the Indians said, zero. That's how zero was introduced into the world. Its square, its square root, whatever you do with it, it always remains zero. The same is with our islands. They go nowhere and never will. Australia, on the other hand, travels towards China, a centimetre per year. If the continents press them, our islands may rise or sink. The Mediterranean Sea filled through Gibraltar for eleven years. The icebergs melted, the Earth's plates moved away from each other, and that's how our seas were formed. There is the Silver Sea beyond Turkey, and that sea has a crack. There is a possibility,

albeit a small one, that the Mediterranean Sea will leak through that crack. But if it empties itself, it will also fill itself up again, and we'll be where we were before. At zero.

There's no one here

There's no one here, we've all died. If I say there are ten of us, I've counted too many. What a pity. Because we have a lovely church with lovely saints, and no one to say Mass. No priest, no doctor, no police on this island. Nothing but wilderness. They all come only when it suits them. The doctor once a month, stylish in her ripped trousers. She comes only *pro forma*. I could die a hundred times before I see you, I tell her. *Fifers*, the Kraut word for money.

It's been months, years since I've seen some of them. I don't even know if they are still alive. To tell you the truth, I couldn't care less. My job is to sit here all day; luckily, I still have my wits about me.

My name is Marija, popularly known as Mare.

[*A two-storey stone house at the tip of an elongated bay cut into the west side of a small island. Mare's house. In the front yard, an upturned wooden boat, painted white and blue. Hers. To the right, a ruin of a similar building. In the walls covered in capers, only the frames – of doors and windows. The remains of green shutters. Collapsed ceilings offer glimpses of the sky. Dry grass, brambles and lizards in what used to be rooms, insects and harmless snakes. The window frame propped up against the front wall puts a white cat napping a few inches ahead into perspective. To the left of Mare's house, a bolted two-storey one, with three pairs of blue shutters. And beyond Mare's overgrown garden, several more similar houses, now empty, but in good repair – the front windows of the closest one face Mare's back windows. Around the houses: a hackberry tree. Pines. Figs. Olives. Vine. Pomegranates. Rosemary and lavender bushes. Walnuts. Bougainvillea.*

There was a time when cucumbers, hydrangeas, marigolds, broccoli, tomatoes, cabbage, beans, celery, potatoes, chilli peppers and artichokes thrived in Mare's garden. When it rains, countless watery nails drive themselves into the surface of the sea and the white-blue body of Mare's upturned boat.]

She saves the seeds

Whatever little she eats these days, she saves the seeds so she can grow them all again one day.

Why don't I take some tea?

Do I, her pretty one, know that she never drinks water straight out of the tap? They mix rainwater with the one brought by the water carrier ship, and God only knows what they put in it. Mare is sceptical, so she boils it.

It never tasted well, but Mare had an idea once and threw in a slice of apple. To give it a boost. Dried marshmallow leaves can also do the trick. Since then, she drinks this apple (or marshmallow) tea, and nothing else. Just a few sips a day, or she would have to run to the toilet all the time. She can barely walk, let alone run. The toilet is on the other side of the courtyard, too far for her, even when there is no bora or rain. Her whole body aches, that is why she has stopped drinking.

Her name is Marija, popularly known as Mare.

They just peeled and scrubbed

Back then, everything was *alright*. The island was this packed with people (*she shakes the joined fingers of her right hand*). And they all sang and danced. Now they are everywhere but here. The devil only knows why.

They, the women, dug and worked the land on the whole island. They were as dogged as hired guns: they just washed and peeled, peeled and scrubbed. And they were always much cleaner than other women. Even Mirko's Tončica, now deceased, had a snow-white skirt, and no water in the house.

Yes, this is her home: this is where she was born and raised, this is where she got married and remained alone.

One of her hips is artificial, the other natural.

She has fallen three times in a month: twice in the garden, and the third time, like this. Between these two benches and the table, that's where she fell. They tell her not to walk on uneven surfaces, but she knows that flat ground is more dangerous.

She does her hair herself – these two skinny braids around her head, she pins them like this. They say they will cut it. They can forget about it, she will have it like this.

If I only knew how beautiful she once was. The most beautiful girl on the island, they said. When she crushed stones for the railroad tracks, they took a photograph of her in traditional dress, with a sickle in her right hand. There it is, on the wall above the kitchen cupboard. Later she had to crush stones on the island too, as there was no gravel for the roads. Ten fingers, ten wounds. Not even the Blacks worked as hard as they did.

Thirty-one girl on that railroad tracks, and just one man – who couldn't take his eyes off her, who mar-

ried her cousin, who had two brothers. The island girls all went to work on railroads and motorways, and they found husbands everywhere they went. They were young, they were pretty, and what is most important, they were clean. Their dress: a white shirt, white kerchief, black apron. Yes, *traversa*, that's what they call that apron, to hell with it. A red headscarf. And a small, silver knife.

Mare discerns objects around herself

Mare discerns objects around herself by their outlines. She finally agreed to them after nine injections straight into her right eye and failed surgeries on both. The nerves are almost dead anyway, the injections unbearably painful.

The last time they came to take her to yet another surgery, *fortuna*, bora, waves splashing across the quay, and she telling them that she was sorry they had taken all that trouble for nothing, but she was not going to the town only for that.

She didn't, so she still sees everything through a haze.

She discerns objects around herself by memory as well. People, too. That's why their faces don't change or get old, but remain as they were the last time she saw them, when she still could see clearly.

What she can feel under her fingertips or remember about the room she is sitting in is this: that there is the same number of columns and rows on the Mediterranean Fish chart poster by the door as in the precise arrangement of watermelon, apple and orange seeds drying on the table; that of the two stoves placed next to one another in the middle of the room she uses neither; that what rattles from time to time, when the wind is particularly strong, are the five oil lamps hanging on the long, rusty nails; that the far right corner of the room holds a bed, a rotary dial phone with a tangled cord and an old calendar above it: two horizontal planes in two hues of blue, the light blue of the sky and the dark blue of the sea, cut through the middle by the vertical of a white sail; that the squares and rectangles of several mirrors reflect the heaps of yellowish paper on the other long table, the fishing nets stretched across an entire wall, fish and shells in frames of various sizes, dusty wine bottles lined up on tall shelves and sepia photographs of dead people, taken in the last century, so that the room seems submerged under the sea – a setting, perhaps, for a one-act play that takes place in a shattered foyer of a sunken ship.

With Mare, who presides over that mess, six months short of her eighty-fifth birthday.

As if she were feeding a baby

Even the little food she eats these days she doesn't eat as she used to. Now she has to break everything into small bits, mush it up as if she were feeding a baby.

Her teeth used to be white like salt; she brushed them every day. They were big and strong. Once a hen pecked a hole in something she needed, and Mare bit off its beak. That's how strong they were, her teeth. Later her gums got inflamed and her teeth got wobbly – and fell out. A sliver remained stuck in the gums, and it hurts, but who would go to have it extracted.

Once, when she brushed them, a tooth flew out of her mouth and into her hand. She immediately showed it to her nephew, who was visiting from the town – look how beautiful her teeth were. Now her upper lateral incisor, the only tooth in her mouth, is brownish, ready to detach itself painlessly from the thin thread of sugar wool on which it dangles as Mare speaks.

In a plastic bag hung on the back of the chair next to her, two courgettes are rotting in the company of some yellowed Swiss chard. Her nephew brought them last weekend, but she is not a sheep to eat them. They are good for her health? If they are good for her health, how come she is ill?

Anka the Gypsy has brought her some conger stew that afternoon, in an empty pickle jar. It is Good Friday, that's why. How will she manage like this? She'll manage just fine.

Sometimes she dreams of octopus. Baked with potatoes under the lid. The one she would catch herself. She would pull it caught on the hook out of the water and onto the boat, and drive the knife right into the creature's head. Shiver like a leaf every time.

The Kraut

Some bake their octopus for under an hour. They want it fast, and fast is not good. Slow is good. It should be baked for at least two hours, to melt in your mouth. Or else not even God could chew it. For a creature of six kilos, for example, Mare would take three to four kilos of potatoes and two or three onions. She would cut the octopus and the vegetables, arrange them in the baking dish, sprinkle them with salt and oil, mix all the ingredients, cover the dish with a lid and bury the lid in embers. Then she would go and do something else. She was never good at waiting, nowadays it is the only thing she does.

The Kraut didn't mind. The waiting. Sometimes he waited for two whole days for them to bring him

some food. The forest where they hid him was near, the distance was not a problem. But they had to be patient and wait for the coast to be clear, so that nobody would notice them. And there were many people then who could have noticed. On both sides, ours and theirs. The poor Kraut, he was tired of the war, he told them, and they believed him.

That is why they fed him, although the soldiers had taken and roasted their sheep. Their hens, bacon and prosciutto, leaving them stripped to the bone. And they had thought that the Krauts had money to burn.

They used to give him some milk as well – half to the children, half to him – even though he was a Kraut. They ripped their aprons to dress his wounds, they picked medicinal herbs and squeezed them above his head, their sap dripping onto it.

You can't starve another human being, even if they are the lowest of the low, right?

The Krauts took four islanders: killed two, brought back two. And once they lined them all up on the coast, like cattle. Men on one side, women on the other; aces here, blanks there.

Later he used to send her the best marzipan from Lübeck, always around Christmas, in small, beautiful parcels. She would never touch them, she's not a whore.

Her name is Marija, popularly known as Mare.

Pure delight

They were two sisters, Mare and Ane, and their younger brother was in America.

Their father had golden hands. He made all the woodwork in the house. Including these windows and those shutters at the front. Only, they are dirty from the dust that the wind lifts up from the ground, and Mare can no longer wash them. She feels bad about it. Before, she had some money to have things repaired, but it's gone now.

If she could, she would rent out to tourists.

There are three rooms on the upper floor: two with two beds and a cubbyhole big enough for a single bed. The high attic could also be turned into an apartment with as many as four beds. But she can't do it – she feels feeble in her bones, in her head. Feeble all over.

She sleeps downstairs now, in the former fish cellar, where she prepared illegal fish stews for the boaters. Her nephew brought her bed here and set it against the wall. She no longer wants to spend time in the adjoining, more comfortable rooms in which she lived with her sister. And sometimes with Luce, her best friend (no, much more than that).

For years now she hasn't set foot in her old bedroom upstairs, and she would love to see it. But I can take a peek if I want to, at least from the stairs.

Why don't I take two biscuits?

The last time they bombed the island, one of those landed at her feet. She was standing right there, at the door. She watched it roll for a while, until it stopped. And she thought it would be better for her to die there, than move an inch. If the first war didn't move her, this one shouldn't either. So she just stood there and watched, waiting for something to happen. But nothing happened – not even a spark. Not a hair of her head was touched. *(She pulls a silvery thread from under her black headscarf and stretches it in the air.)*

If that hadn't been God's work, she doesn't know whose work it was.

Afterwards the army came and picked the bomb from the floor; exploded it in the sea. Now everybody would buy at least a chicken-coop here, if they could.

She feels for them, because the ugliest things she has ever seen are those tall tall houses. She would piss on them, from the roof, and let it trickle all the way down. That's what she would do.

She first saw them on the postcards her brother sent from New York, and later here as well, in the town. Dead. *(She cries for a second and quickly collects herself.)* Every morning she prays for him and all the others who are gone. She talks with them. Every morning she talks with at least fifty dead people, up to lunchtime. Before she used to take a break and prepare something to eat: some pasta with tomatoes or polenta with milk. Now she just goes back to bed.

It's as if they had been, but hadn't, and maybe it would be better to shell the very spot she is sitting on, than to live on this island. It has to be. Then again, they like it here – it is quiet and clean. Pure delight.

It's just

That March bora on the seventh, the seventeenth and the twenty-seventh. Every year without fail, like clockwork.

The only thing

She misses from her garden are artichokes.

Voices over the water

[*Several men and two women are sitting in front of the grocery store in that same bay: one of the women is the substitute postwoman, who also unlocks the kiosk in the little port three times a day and sells ferry tickets; the other is the note-taker, from now on "signorina". The owner/cashier of the store used to be the head of the local committee, until the committee was dissolved for its inefficiency. The voices carry over the smooth surface of the sea to the other side of the Small Bay, and if anybody was there listening, they would clearly hear every word being said.*]

Good, not a drop of rain.

They said we may expect it tomorrow.

Indeed, on the night from Saturday to Sunday.

It's dry to heavens and back.

The length of a shovel, that's how dry it is.

Well, fuck it.

(*In the meantime, the shopkeeper returns from inside the store.)*

Pere, would you care to explain to me why you have taken my seat? You, a man from Paris.

You are here to serve us.

I'm Jesus Christ.

And there's nobody more wicked than you.

There is no God.

Mind you, he's Pierre now.

Care for a coffee?

Make it the way I drink it.

Today we respect the old custom – as much wine, that much blood.

It's Good Friday, that's why.

Remember the Good Friday when that man skidded off the road to the old graveyard? It was as if he'd parked his car. Not a scratch on him.

God protects the insane and the drunk.

Always.

Pero, what time is lunch?

Ten to twelve.

He's like a little bird in a nest. The only thing he can do is peep.

He's invited us for a cod stew, and now he wants us to pay.

Fuck me if I'm giving you my money.

Fuck you.

Do you believe in that guy up in heavens? When you come to his door...

I think he's too old. Big beard, eyeglasses, he can't do it any longer. And if he'd written the laws in small letters, he can't read them anymore, poor thing.

My eyesight is bad, too. Gets blurred sometimes. Could be from high blood sugar, who knows.

(*Another man arrives*.)

Good morning.

Did you play yesterday?

My accordion makes funny noises. I bought it second-hand, and now it sounds funny.

Get a new one from Marko.

Jozo has one in his field.

But he can't play.

Love connects us and binds us together...

And the other one?

I don't know them all yet, one at a time.

May I know which the other one is?

Nobody has it better than us... Christmas carols, polka songs. I'll learn them all by summer.

Marko can play, ask him to teach you.

Can he read music?

I don't think so.

Tone showed me how to play.

When did you start?

End of January.

Which year?

This, for fuck's sake.

Have you any idea how long it takes? At least a year.

I reckon I'll be playing on the terrace by mid-July.

Do you know Mirko?

Why?

We had the same teacher. He didn't know a first thing about the accordion, and now he's making some serious money off the tourists in the hotel.

You'd sooner teach a donkey to play.

Well, he's learnt.

He wants me to stretch that note as long as it lasts. You know, when tourists have had a few...

I've found a singer, too. Vinko Šarunić.

His father used to sing. He had a good voice.

Does Vinko have an accordion?

He has a guitar.

What happened to the late Šime's accordion?

How should I know?

Did you see how Šarunić played bocce last Friday, against himself and his team?

That's why we won.

You've lost weight, you should eat your fill.

Is there a starter, or it's just the cod?

Mind you, it's *baccalà alla bianco*.

If you don't shut your mouth, we'll end up eating pates.

I'll buy a tin of sardines.

I eat like they eat in hospitals. When I hear the noon bell ring, my mouth waters.

The Parisian cod.

They'll take Croatian from us soon enough.

Europe takes care of its dialects.

But not of small fishermen! They don't let them throw their nets.

Nobody goes fishing on Good Friday anyway.

One went and caught a human skull.

They say carob can be used to make an atomic bomb.

It can, if you mix it with sea salt.

That's a recipe one carries to their grave.

What do you think, Kapo? That cake you've put on the Internet looks too good to eat.

Kapo is a cake expert, no woman can match him in that department.

Have you found yourself a woman?

Nothing.

I would even take one with a child.

Well, fuck it.

That hillbilly matchmaker has been sending me pictures of some Indonesian women. But he says it's too far for them to come to this island.

Too far! And you could carry five litres on your member.

Look at Kapo's earrings! A sign he likes men.

You're an idiot.

We're looking for a wig for the baldy! He likes men!

There must be some on eBay.

It won't arrive on time for the procession today, but with our Internet, it may come by St Stephen's Day.

Kapo would make a fine blonde with those eyes of his.

There was a time when you could tie your boat to a vine.

It was that strong.

You could cut wine with a knife.

And now this Amaro will be the death of us.

Soon we'll be just sitting humbly under a hackberry tree, with a holy rosary in our hands. We are in the third age.

You're already sitting under a hackberry tree. It's the humbleness you have a problem with.

Never mind. The women are praying for us.

You see, Kapo, you have to find yourself a woman to pray for you.

That would put my mother out of business.

(*Three women are sitting on a nearby bench by the sea, with bandages on their arms or legs. A pair of crutches is propped against the trunk of a pine tree. Loaves of bread in white plastic bags are hanging on the back of the bench*.)

Have you called Stavros[1] to sing at the feast? What does he say, is he coming?

Forget Stavros. By then, Ivo will have learnt to play polka for us.

(*Two hours later, in a somewhat changed composition, the centre of attention is a bearded man with a guitar, and that suits everybody present.*)

He's pulling my balls now, painting them like Christmas eggs. And I used to carry him in my arms when he was no bigger than a loaf of bread.

Your brain has gone to mush.

Bring me a beer, and I'll show you some real action. *Oh demijohn, sweet little demijohn...*

A little tipsy, aren't you?

Yes, I've had a few.

Nobody drinks and sings today.

Leave him alone, he can't help himself.

Don't you have to take the bread to your wife?

I'm late, she'll kill me.

Shut up, you yokel!

What's gotten into you?

Nothing. Why?

He saw the signorina, so he sings.

He shouldn't be doing it today.

The night is to blame, Andrleja, Andrleja, Andrleja is dreaming...

We used to drill tourists like drilling machines. They were lying on a flat stone, with their legs in the water. One's hair down there looked like a cockscomb, the other was hairy like a boar. *I've found a photo more valuable than life, the old wounds opened again with the memories of days past*... I had to blush.

You didn't have to, you wanted to.

They say drugs from a sunken ship have washed ashore in our bays. It would've been better if women washed ashore.

You'd do anything that moves.

1 Jasmin Stavros is a popular Croatian singer.

Don't be a sour grape. If you were smart, you'd sing, too.

You're not singing, you're braying.

They see foreigners and then think they are men of the world.

You're stupid like a turkey. Gobble, gobble, gobble...

I'm 76, and you expect my brain to be fresh.

Your brain was musty even when you were young.

He's a menopause baby.

Eat shit.

My goldfinch and I used to sing for women. Drunkards, both of us.

Marko has sent me, he says you've prepared tripe for lunch. (*Says the boy who has just arrived to the singer.*)

He promised to bring me wine and all. When is he coming?

His grapes aren't working.

His wine sticks in the throat like those dry figs from Šibenik.

He stuffs himself with spicy tripe and just burps.

Mamma mia, dammi cento lire, che in America voglio andar...

Now everyone thinks of Euros.

I was a sailor in 1969. They were all poets.

Who, the sailors?

The ships: Hektorović, Njegoš, Nazor, Cankar... I had a sea of women then, my bunk was always creaking.

Come, sing a serenade for our signorina.

Adio Mare, adio bella Napoli, adio sole mio, adio my love... You should see my garden, young lady, it's like in Italy. With tomatoes and everything... When you enter, you don't know where you are.

Fuck a duck.

I'd like to take a photo of you with that Japanese camera that makes a thousand pictures, and then you choose on the computer the ones you want. *(The singer addresses the note-taker.)*

My granddaughter trains boxing, you should see how she punches. The other day she knocked them all down.

Is Anđelina here? The hospital is calling, she needs to have a hip surgery. (*The shopkeeper asks.*)

Tell them to call two houses down.

It's been twenty-six days that my phone and Internet are not working. It would be faster to go to China and come back with the spare parts.

You said it.

If you get a heart attack here, you're sure to die.

Like that Albanian who chopped pine trees to burn in his bread oven.

What do you know, you were still in your father's balls when that happened.

You could smell that bread in the whole bay. And the smoke all the way to the land.

He was not an Albanian, his father was from Calabria.

What did he look like?

I'd kill myself if he'd looked anything like you.

His grandfather was a cowboy in America.

Get away with you, what cowboy?

When New York was still surrounded by a wasteland.

His father just dropped down in front of the church, when the church was both doctor and God.

And now we'll all burn in hell.

A thousand years ago, we burnt the Illyrians, the Romans and the Delmatae. Now it's our turn to burn.

Only the romantics live on this island.

And the blind Mare.

Sometimes I wonder what she dreams about.

She doesn't dream, she smoulders in the dark.

Instructions

On my way to the Old Village on the brow of the island, I ask directions from a man with a light coloured hat, who is tilling his field. You are on a good road, but you can also go by that little church over there, built in the year of ..., and reconstructed in baroque in the year of ... .

Hunger

He could eat my leg up right now, the hunter said staring at my calves.

I was sitting at his garden table, with an opened notebook in front of me, and he was cleaning mullets above the sink set in a wooden plank fixed to the outer wall. Not even like that, smeared with blood and fish scales, with a big knife in his hand, did he seem threatening, and what he just said wasn't meant as flirting. He was telling me about himself, matter-of-factly. About his hunger.

When he rinsed and salted the mullets, he carried them to the old hearth and placed them on the grill above glowing embers.

When he still lived across her – before he came here, to the Old Village – the hunter couldn't handle Mare. She used to steal his socks from the drying stand, always just one sock out of a pair, he said as he stood in his swimming trunks in the corner of a concrete courtyard, washing himself before lunch with the water from a garden hose, rivulets streaming down his sunburnt back.

She would sneak around his house at night, then during the day pretend she could barely stand up. She'd bury twigs of lavender under his doorsteps. At dusk he would see her in her front yard, threading a needle with perfectly calm hands, without eyeglasses. Have I ever heard of a hundred-year-old hag who can do that? Let alone a blind one.

Then he carelessly dried himself with a dirty towel and went to check the mullets. These are females, females are fatter, he said a bit later, when he served them.

The authentic taste of canned beef stew

Lately he's been trying to obtain the authentic taste of canned beef stew. He loves that sauce with the lonely small pieces of overcooked meat floating in it, usually just two or three. He has figured out eighty percent of the original recipe, and now he is going after the remaining twenty. No, he is not too hopeful. He knows there has to be a secret ingredient that can't be found here on the island. It's probably something from a laboratory, with a capital letter and numbers in its name, something he wouldn't even want to put in his stew. He has never bothered to read the list of ingredients on the declaration, it's all deceit anyway, and besides, the print is too small. He relies on his nose, as usual.

The day before yesterday he fried an onion in vegetable oil until it was half done. He added a finely

chopped green pepper, and simmered it all gently on low heat for a while. With a pinch of red paprika, pepper and Vegeta seasoning, a teaspoon of lard.

Then he diced the meat of the beef shank that hadn't completely disintegrated in the pressure-cooker and put it aside, for later, poured the water with fibres over the vegetables and spices, and stirred the whole thing. The mixture was so thick, that there was no need to add any flour. When it was almost done, he added some strained tomato and salt. He devoured the whole thing. After the midday news, he made coffee in moka pot, with rainwater. Had a smoke.

Towards the more recent history of the island I: The place from where she could see the sea

Her right hand would rest in a resolute vertical in the square of light on the door-post. Without twitching, that corneous hand would measure its strength, its fading. Visible to the hunter from his front yard when he stood on tiptoe and peeked over the wall. The hand, not she.

He knew that, at some point, she would pick up the plates with food she had left sitting for hours on the cabinet by the door, and carry them to the other side of her yard for the cats: fish that went off, strawberries in an advanced stage of fermentation, curdled milk. Only sometimes would she take a bite of what Anka the Gipsy regularly brought for her since she came to the island. He suspected that the unpleasant scents filled her with mortal panic, like they did lobsters, but that she always waited for them to reach the peak of intensity and become unbearable, before she did anything to get rid of them. That she herself became rancid in the sun, and she didn't like it, but she waited for her blood to start running through her body again, calming the pins and needles in her legs. Only then would she wobble to the garden tap.

Before, she sometimes played with the thought of tearing off a small piece of her body. An insignificant part for a starter, such as a little finger. To see if anything would change, if she would notice the difference. She hoped that, in time, the tearing would make her disappear. The whole of her. But every time she was shocked by the pain she felt when she deliberately crushed her finger with a stone or, much earlier, furtively brought her hand close to the fire, scorching a patch of skin. That patch would then demand all her attention: it would wind her around itself like yarn. She soon realised she was not divisible – she had to deal with her wholeness. Like that, still undiminished, she was more bearable to herself.

Every time she comes to the tap, she turns it on and takes off the big white panties under her black

dress, unbuttons her black shirt and wriggles out of it, remaining in a white camisole with a lace flower between her saggy breasts as the plastic orange basin fills with water. She squats down and lifts her skirt up, tucks it into the elastic waistband. Picks up a rather big blue sponge from the ground, shakes it free of small twigs and leaves, and dips it into the cold water.

First she rubs the sparse hair under her left arm, then under the right one. Rinses the sponge. Still squatting, she brings the sponge to her cunt, winces when she feels the cold water. At the next try she is already ready. And she always rubs it with vigorous circular movements.

She washes herself at least three times a day, without soap, because she can't stand perfumes. The first time right after she wakes up, whenever that is. The second time before she goes to bed in the evening. And every time she can smell herself.

She used to shrink from the holy water in the stone basins by the church door, its smell of all the hands on the island that she recognized. For a long time she couldn't shake off the fear that one day the priest's perfumed fingers will, instead of a communion wafer, offer her a glass filled to the rim with other people's hands dissolved in holy water. That those hands would touch her on the inside. The nightmare of that fear in her awake hours alternated with the dream in which she ran her hand over the fine sand rearranged by the sea rhythmically withdrawing from it – her fingers gliding pleasantly through the smooth mass, until that smoothness was suddenly broken by jagged stones.

Like when she climbed the carob tree at the lookout near the house and pressed herself against its trunk, when she was a few days older than thirty, although she couldn't have known it. She ran her fingertips over the bark, then brought them to her nose and inhaled the stickiness of resin, the slivers of wood. The three-day stubble beard, the tip of the nose and then up, where the eyebrows began, the eyes in front of which she slowed down, eased the pressure as he closed them, tickling her palm with his eyelashes, and over the forehead to the hairline. Like a comb through the thick, coarse hair. Plunging through the gullet, towards the stomach, forking down the thighs.

That evening, they found her under the tree. Carried her back into the house and placed her on the bed. They put her left arm in a splint made of wooden boards. For a month she dreamt the texture of that carob-tree, feeling a warm puddle pooling at the bottom of her pelvis, with nowhere to drain. With her good arm she would sometimes reach for that spot, for the place from where she could see the sea.

In time, the number of other hands decreased, until they completely disappeared from her close proximity, from her, and her timidity sharpened like a sense. She no longer left her courtyard in which, in the penum-

bra of the dawn or a bit later, sitting in the shadow of the old walnut tree on the concrete, she podded the broad beans from four to nine in the morning, before the scorching heat.

The hunter didn't know if she could feel his gaze, so he would often lower his eyes in embarrassment. He never lowered them for any other reason.

How does she know, how does she know anything?

He suspected that, behind the thick walls of the small room and under the innumerable layers of blankets pulled over her immobile body on the bed, her skin was an infallible barometer. That is why, when sirocco blows, she never leaves it.