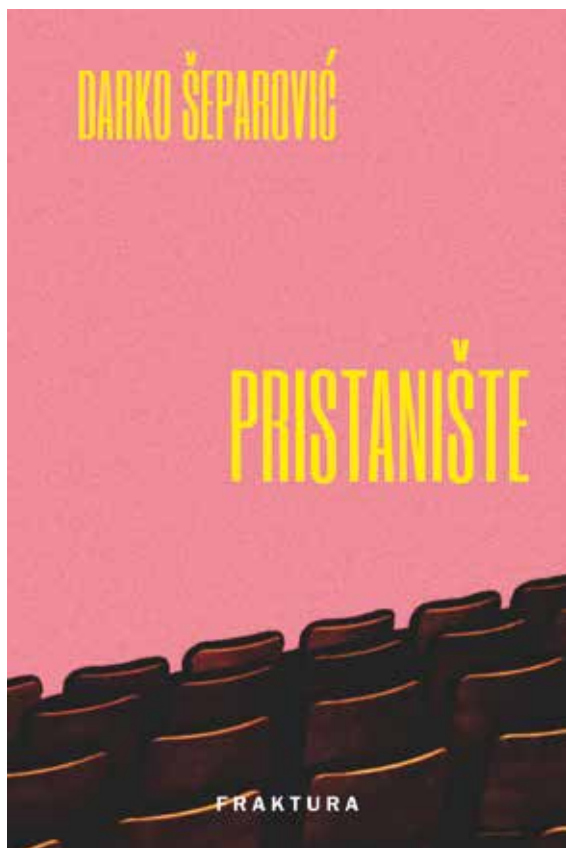


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The Pier
(Pristanište)

Novel

Translated by Rachael Daum



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1.

There had probably always been something in that wood that I hadn't been able to name, and I don't know if it's because of the density or the warmth it gives off, but recently I've been walking around my apartment barefoot so my heels can feel the softness and the tree rings that follow the arches of my feet. Behind me are thousands of meters hiked, through which I drink in the years and years it takes for wood to grow.

And I try to put a name to what's in the wood, this something unnamable growing in my brain, spreading with the speed of the heat of baking bread to my organs, taking away the time I could have spent with her. Since she announced that she's leaving, she spends most of her time in the studio, painting. I'm on the wood and it is good; it is good as long as I manage to hide from her my preoccupation with the idea that we could make something from the wood, that we could deepen our relationship where the wood is on one side and we on the other side of the world. *This obsession with the wood floor is just a phase*, I say, and she goes on painting silently. If her suspicions turned out to be right, that would be the moment when, between the world and me, only wood is left; no other body, soles of cheap shoes, slippers that are falling apart, there won't be car tires, scuba suits, thin laminate floorboards, bed sheets, wool socks, baked pottery, cast iron, the other body that I lie on and which our bed is under. No warmth of her skin, plush, silk, wool, cashmere, latex; there will only be wood and nothing but wood will prove the existence of gravitational force.

In the moment I feel that I'm losing the ground under my feet, I give in to the wood.

With every step on the ground I become aware of the time it takes for a sapling to grow into a broad trunk, I see the work of heavy machinery and skilled craftsmen, all the preparation and work needed for the shaping of wood. I walk aware of all that preceded my walk, and I am alive.

Alive.

I want to wear down the wood, produce a patina and an archaeology that will be read in the abrasions on the surface. My private journal has no letters, the words have been replaced by scuffs upon the wood, each mark is a single sentence recorded by movement, coincidence, or the shifting of furniture. This wood I walk on is an archive of journal entries, and when I look at it, images emerge.

We don't need to talk about ourselves, immersing into ourselves like tadpoles. Some things remain unutterable, and when I walk on the wood I don't think about how far away I am from her.

I look at the wooden floor and I see a forest of teak, somewhere deep in Burma, in a thick monsoon forest someone is standing and awaiting the start of the felling of the tall trees. *We are not there*, I say. The felling begins in the middle, spreads concentrically, and the circles are accompanied by the breaking of branches and the trembling of the earth. The trees collapse one after the other, as though there were no simpler way to illuminate the ground they grew from. The dust that billows when a tree is felled looks like the dust in our apartment. Burma is sultry and filled with mosquitoes, your shirt sticks to your skin, the branches of the canopy are sawed at until only the trunks are left. A vertical world disappears, the animals leave their lairs without looking back, and the traces left behind them are covered with leaves. The loading into the tractor trailers is the start of the journey, wide tires falling into potholes on the road and every pothole is a new jab of the tractor trailers into the trunks. They puncture the peeling bark, yellow-brown resin glimmers in the sun like early blood.

When it is cut down, the wood stops growing, but only in a physical sense. Its growth goes on in the journey to the place where it is dried, peeled, dissected, cut, and again set again on its way. The growth may also be measured in miles crossed, and somewhere before the end of that road, the wood is shaped into something meaningful, like the floor of the apartment we live in and which I've been walking on barefoot for days.

Then the image slowly blurs. I still don't know what I'll make from of the wood floor when she leaves. That's why I'm restless. Between her painting and my wood there is a thick vacuum of doubt and uncertainty. Words rebound off us.

Clouds, I say, *clouds*.

And this rain is still falling, it hasn't stopped for days. Today I came across a little bump, the first sign that something is happening to the wood. Is it too cramped in the house, in this seaside town?

A unease the size of your average man has settled in me.

And it's growing.

The damp the clouds bring is reflected on the surface of the wood floor. The

bumps that are growing from the floor are round and stolid like knots in muscle. The rain changes the properties of the wood, the length and width of the boards, it grows and moves like it never left the forest. But this is no forest and I don't know how to prevent the wood from leaving the apartment. Should I lay a carpet under the table and chairs, reduce scraping and so lessen the surface injuries? Would that be enough? How much time do I have?

The restlessness in me grows, driven by the damp that I know will cause the appearance of rot in the wood. If I act too late, the floor will disintegrate into a thousand pieces. I mustn't allow that to happen.

But the rain doesn't stop.

I never knew how to answer concrete questions, the ones that start with *What*, *How*, or a third party—like *And?* It's easiest to pose questions like that and wait in refuge for the answers that miss the target till the cartridge is empty. I avoid all that with one little *Nothing*, and nothing is always nothing, so I never managed to explain to her what I see in the wood floor. But, when I scratch beneath the surface, where the nails briefly detach from the flesh, I see that this floor has neither glue nor binding elements, the boards are laid on wooden beams, and left between them are the gaps where the wood breathes.

The damp reduces the gaps because the wood expands and I hear cracking like stiff fingers stretching. The lips dry out from the edge towards the center, that's how wood expands, the gaps are largest by the walls and get smaller towards the center, where the first bumps appear. I don't want to be left alone without the wood or without her. I won't choose. The wood creaks and screeches, it closes in on itself like soft lungs beneath ribs. The rain falls harder, the wood expands, I walk across the apartment left-right, I feel the floor. If the gaps disappear, it will begin to rot, invisible and slow because it starts inside. Rot sinks its fangs deep into wood. I can't predict the rate of the narrowing of the gaps or control the weather conditions.

The only thing I'm sure of is that the dust will stay trapped in those gaps.

There's too much I don't know, something is always missing, the rings are too narrow, the knots are too tight. Sometimes it seems to me that the night sleeps in her black hair. *Wood. I need to make something from the wood floor.* I could try to control for the spots with the smallest gaps and wait there for the first signs of rot, but I'd have to find a more concrete solution. Otherwise I'll lose the wood just like I'll lose her.

The front door to the apartment opens, she walks in, I lie on my stomach and study the gaps between the boards. Her *What's wrong with you now* I yell back with *Nothing. Nothing*; and nothing is always nothing. The gaps are filled with dust, I go in and spread it around like thick snow, I am freeing space so the wood can

breathe. *I came to get a box*, she says, and I leave the silence to accompany her into the studio. I need to make something from the wood. The rain has been hung over the city, modest clouds and damp creep into all the immobile parts of our life together, most into the wood.

In order to ward off rot, the wood must be nurtured, rubbed with oils, sanded, cleaned, lacquered, the apartment ventilated, not allowing water to stand too long on the floor, but all that work is just a prolonging. I await the change of weather, for the rain to stop and a little sun to consider what to do.

What next?

I peek out the window, just a rectangular opening separating me from the waterfront. It's hard down there, there are no rings or gaps, the stone is toothy and there is no warmth in it. If I jumped and stuck to the hard pavement, who would make something from the wood, who would strip it board by board and rearrange it into one body? I wouldn't want to leave the wood so easily and while I think of what I'll make, the rain slows, the clouds part, and the sun appears.

I open all the doors in the apartment and move from space to space, and when I stop, I stare at the floor, checking to see if any new bumps have surfaced. The rays of sunlight gradually illuminate the apartment, I open the windows, the rain has stopped at last and the sun's warmth presses on the wood. The damp is palpably evaporating. Once again I run my finger over all the gaps. On the kitchen wall I write the distance between all the boards with a pencil. This will be my calendar, without dates, moon phases, or holidays. I will measure the flow of time solely with the width of the gaps.

I am sure the floorboards wish to become one body again, that's why they expand and contract and this process produces a cry similar to the cries of trapped animals. It's humid. I glance out the window again, the crispness of the still-wet rosemary bushes enters my nostrils and for a moment unravels the roots of the wood that have been woven through my brain. The ferry sails up to the pier. The travelers come out onto the deck to watch the maneuvering of the huge boat, standing on steel and my skin crawls at the thought that no part of their bodies are touching any wood. Everything in this scene is cold, even the strong sun cannot help. I look at all those people, they don't care about the expanding and contracting of the wood, the changing of temperatures or the damp that is visible on the floorboards. The smell of rosemary still holds me out of the reach of the roots of the wood. Maybe wood needs to stay wood, there are more important things than that. I don't need to worry so much about what I'll make from it, just like I don't need to think about the rain, the sun, drainage, decay, and the hard autumn that brings everything with it: rot and bad weather.

The ferry has docked and the passengers disembark. They pass under the

window pulling suitcases at a safe distance from their bodies. The scent of rosemary fades, and is mixed in with the smell of gasoline. The gases evaporate. The roots spread. I will await the next rain fearing how many new bumps will emerge from the wood, again I will listen to the creaking, those cutting cries inhabiting my head.

I need to think about what I'll make with the wood floor, work out the details, sketch, write, forget everything else, pour the everyday into a jar and leave it in the fridge to chill with the meat and the bones. Much work awaits me, the outcome of which I am not certain, but I have to start somewhere.

She comes into the apartment. I stand in front of the open window and look at the ferry as it fills with people and cars. She looks for something and closes all the doors I opened as she does. She looks at the kitchen wall, reads the numbers, my hard-to-read handwriting on the white wall.

I can't do this anymore, she says, I can't.

I take her hand, as though to catch everything I am irretrievably losing and say *What I'll make from the wood will have an unpredictable direction and determination, I'll take apart the whole floor in the studio and here in the apartment, take out all the boards one by one like the thistles from your dress. I'll make curves from these boards, the one rounded form will have a route undefined by anything, I won't use nails or screws, just grooves and feathers, there will be no room for dust in the joints, I'll lacquer the surface with a yellow-brown color that will reflect the sky and nothing will come towards us vertically. The wood will travel continuing the natural process of growth, the smooth and lacquered surface will absorb the sun and journey as if it is growing constantly and time won't exist for this one, unbreakably bound body. That's how I imagine love.*

While I'm holding her hand, she says *But there's no more us.*

2.

When I look long enough into the wood floor... sometimes I dive into it. Before the storm breaks, the sea is calm. I reach the sea floor in one breath, it's soft and I dig my heels into the grey sand. A few short sandy waves rise up around my ankles. The sand surrounding me is crushed stone dust I must dance with, and the dance is like the language I'll raise the sea with, the stone and the worn glass; our bodies will be perfectly bound, between us only salt water bubbles move.

My lungs expand and contract, my ribcage moves static fluid and the sea becomes agitated, manipulated by bones and skin. My eyes are closed. While we dance, it's important how powerful the grip of the arm is around the waist, whether we're close to one another, and how I slow my breathing as I unfurl my tongue.

On the sea floor there is silence, no scents, my nose is full of salt and invisible plankton; I see the changing of colors—green becomes blue. In the depths there are no pine trees, forests, or vegetation, I'm one hundred feet beneath the ocean's surface whose pressure—one hundred times intensified—presses down on me and buries me like the years I carry on my back. I'm not afraid of something bad happening, the sea is warm and heats the prelude of plankton on the body.

My movements are well-coded signals, the sea does not resist, my bones and skin mark the directions in the deep and wide. I dance and with the dance I will beget a storm, and maybe it won't be a storm at all but a few powerful blows of seawater.

It's important that we dance.

I open my eyes, set my legs apart. To the right approaches a school of curious mackerel that continue off in some other direction while a gentle northwest current caresses the skin of my face.

With my rounded wrist, I squeeze my palm at precise intervals, changing the

direction of the sea current; the plankton around me scatter, the sea clears, and it's no longer a sea but rather a thick blue mass uncontrollably swirling the sand.

The crushed stones and sharp glass, solid crags turned to dust. It all rises to the sea surface and becomes concentrated energy which large waves will rise from. I grasp the years necessary for the stones to become dust, I turn them into hundreds of pounds of directed mass. I am firmly buried into the bottom, I don't move, and powerful vortexes swirl around me, spiraling up toward the surface. Their potential energy sways the sea, it oscillates as though the tide's ebb and flow are happening simultaneously.

I direct the tidal waves toward the seaside town, no one there expects a thing, the boats moored to the waterfront are the first to sway, the bast fiber cords strain, but don't snap. The waves continue on to the first houses, flood the pier, then the waterfront, the manicured plants and pines, and then reach the front door of the first row of houses by the sea.

I slow my dance, the force of the waves subsides and for a moment they recede. What comes next will be even stronger.

The blue-white mass drags behind it the filth of the town, terraces, bicycles, improperly parked cars, the fertile earth is diluted by the silt of the sea, a siren sounds the alarm, followed by the snapping of metal and the cords of the moored boats.

For a moment it looks like the tidal waves have receded and the worst is past, but it isn't. I continue my dance, I need to gather enough energy to create new waves.

The elastic ligaments in my body start to tighten and loosen. I move my hips and shoulders, with great speed the rhythm is sent to the surface of the sea and it tightens itself up into a skein, ready for the new ascent of waves.

The waves hover over the roofs of the town, they give way as the seamless pipes in the building walls do, warm feces cloud the sea, metal hedges rasp down the stone streets as though someone is drowning a herd of bison, and the sirens screech the alarm. The stone facades are wet, the streets are filthy, the pipes are cracked and a few people are running uphill. Running from the sea.

With my dance I cleanse the seaside town, only the most dogged stay and await the morning, but no one knows what will be left, whether they will have someone to go back to, whether they will endure hours and hours while the sand strikes their whole bodies.

I stop.

When the sea recedes, when this seaside town is cleansed of filth, when my head emerges from the surface and I hold her hard and without letting go, as

though by squeezing her once and for all, all doubts will disappear. Anything that happens after this will be as uncertain as stormy nights or the last match you blow out.

3.

I opened my eyes, stretched my arms, and bent my spine until there was a bursting of bubbles in my joints. The cracking of bones is a sure sign of wakefulness, but I don't know why I've woken up. She sleeps beside me, it's night, nothing important has happened, just occasionally I hear tapping like the creaking of wood, it rings out first at a high frequency, which then decreases, and it gradually stops.

I won't turn on the light, I slowly sneak out of bed and quietly close the bedroom door. I peer through the peephole in the front door. It's dark in the corridor, but the sound is there again and has been amplified to a high pitch, and then disappears. This time the sound lasted a bit longer, for a moment it even took on a discernible form, as if the mass of sound had frozen in front of me and melted into proper droplets. The rhythm of the sound suggested it would come again. The sound settles down, it's not uniform, it does not come again. I still turn on no lights in the apartment, I'm afraid of losing my hearing. I need to find out where the sound is coming from and who is making it.

Motionless I stand before the front door. The sounds can be heard better in the dark, the body directs its disposable capacity to the earlobes, and inside the hammer, anvil, the little mechanical parts strain to accept the vibrations for the brain to turn into something recognizable.

But what is it I hear?

What sort of body is making the sound, is it a defined form I can grasp like a sphere or a cube? Maybe it's something sharp, an object made on the conveyor belt of a steel mill?

I need to go into the living room. I won't touch the walls because my body would divert the effort slated for sound to touch. I concentrate on the sound and walk, relying on my good knowledge of the layout of the apartment. It's more certain in the dark, no peripheral vision, insects, dishes, objects or hard points.

I'm listening.

She's still sleeping.

The silence lasts another few minutes, overflowing with bad presentiment. I hear a car parking on the street, the motor doesn't turn off. The door opens, someone gets in or out, the driver continues on their planned route. The plastic lid to the trash bin lifts, glass bottles rattle. I want to open the blinds, look out the window, but I won't. The sound could disappear. The rattling of the glass bottles soon stops. I'm in silence again, and anticipation strains from my head to my feet.

There it is again. That sound, those soft taps.

Because of the rhythm and frequency, I'm guessing it isn't human. Perhaps its origin is the result of human action, but on the way to me its form got distorted into noise. As though somewhere, something is rolling behind a hill, vibrations spreading, stones breaking apart, the hands are too weak and everything is cracking. The ligaments of the cleft separate the stones from the ground like the thick roots of the wood that tighten around my body. I close my eyes.

I don't know whether I'll hear the sound again, maybe in my sleep? If I lie down next to her in the warm bed and cover my head with a blanket, I probably won't hear anything, a dream will occupy my mind and I'll see black and white images of my subconscious. Her warm body will warm mine.

But I can't sleep now.

I try to judge where the chair is so I don't kick it. That would cause an irreversible loss of the ability to hear the sound, the pain would spread through my body, and my hearing diminish. Maybe I'd let out a shout.

The darkness and silence itch like a coat on bare skin. I'll have to do something soon. If I stay too long in this still position, air bubbles will start to settle into my joints, I'll freeze in place and who would move me then? My fear of stillness moves my legs forward. I open my eyes, though I can't see anything.

I grope the walls and with slow steps move in the direction of the light switch. When the light illuminates the living room, the sound starts again. This time it became clear very quickly, turning into a monotone voice which, in one breath, as though speaking from the head of the table, says *And still in my place something grows in the direction opposing gravity.*

Though I hadn't understood anything, I at last made out one decipherable sentence. It seemed that the source of the voice was somewhere beneath me, but the sentence was too short for me to say so with certainty. The voice could glance off the smooth surface, and the echo mask the source. I can only guess, apply a procedure of trial and error. Where will this take me, will the strain of uncovering the source of the sound yield any concrete answer?

Maybe I'll discover that the voice actually is the sound, the result of forgetfulness, an unclosed window or a poorly-tuned instrument. Maybe the voice is someone's call for help. Who is sending it, and can anyone else hear it?

Cautiously I lift the blinds in the living room as though I'm taking hair from her clothes. I don't want to wake her. I open one shutter and look out onto the street. There are parked cars and illuminated streetlights down there, outside the buildings stand trash bins. An early-morning ferry sails away from the pier, the waterfront is empty as in a fuzzy dream. I lean out a little more and look into the windows below. There's no light on in her studio, but that doesn't mean that there isn't someone below, in the dark and intoxicated by oil paints.

She's still sleeping.

I go to the other side of the apartment, open the kitchen window and lean out. No lights on below. Then where is this voice coming from, who's saying all this? What if there's a burglar in the studio, or a ceremony for burning paintings? Am I overreacting, why aren't the windows closed more tightly? Can I put something to rights or is there a drowning man I can stretch out my hand to?

My doubts can only be assuaged by going downstairs and going into the studio. I don't know where she put the keys, and I don't want to wake her up. I look through the apartment, but I don't see the keys. I'll take the risk and go out even though I've shut myself in the apartment for days, while I walk barefoot making contact with the wood. I don't have much choice. I could put on clogs and go out into the unknown, the unknown in this case being the twenty-two steps down.

I change my mind.

Is this suspicion over the source of the voice enough to leave the security of the apartment and her, sleeping in the bedroom? I don't want to be disappointed, put so much effort into the descent just to be sure that everything is all right.

The voice calls out again and continues as it did before. *When they decided to cut me down, I changed form. My sap evaporated, my resin gushed out, but I became harder and more resistant. I don't make oxygen anymore. What am I doing now so still and glued to the ground I once grew from?*

The voice is talking to me. That's for sure now.

I used to hear certain sounds I would translate into words, but tonight this is different. Direct and personal. I don't doubt my power of judgment, I need to find out what this voice wants from me. I put on my black clogs, my feet touch the sanded-down wood and an unpleasant feeling overtakes me, like cold water poured down my warm back and sliding down the curve of my spine all the way to my tailbone.

Am I ready to step outside?

After a few steps I feel blisters. The clogs are tight, but I need to push on. It's just twenty-two steps. I walk cautiously, no sudden moves.

The aluminum trim separates the wood floor of the apartment and the landing at the top of the stairs. It seems like all the hours spent in this apartment tonight are piled on the edge of that thin metal and that what I need to jump over is not a piece of aluminum, but a thick dreg of fears without name. But they're there. For months they've been growing, since she announced her departure. Even though I am physically ready to step forward and jump over the threshold, my brain is still resisting. Something inside dilutes the thought into a fluid that chokes the drive for curiosity. I need to find out what the voice is, who is making it, and then I'll be able to fall asleep in peace. Nothing terrible will happen, tomorrow I'll walk barefoot over the finely sanded floor.

But something is still holding me glued to the wood floor of the apartment, some indefinable force, powerful as a rope. Does it have something to do with her?

The voice calls out again. It says *Take a step.*

Clack.

The clog, as it collides with the landing, makes an all but forgotten chirp of wood hitting the floor. My right foot is on the landing of the staircase, and the left is still on the floor of the apartment. I am split in two. Images of unknown horror pass through my head, manifested in cramps on my face. I grit my teeth, pass my hand through my hair, rub my face and in the dark find a moment of peace. I pull the other foot out of the apartment and throw it onto the landing.

Clack.

I close the apartment door, and it covers the aluminum trim. I'm on the other side of the world.

Clack-clack, clack-clack. I turn the light in the staircase on.

First they stripped my bark, the voice broke through in the staircase. Imagine skin being stripped alive, but it's brittle, so it cracks and breaks off unevenly into bits, and every fall of every bit to the floor brings pain.

Clack-clack, clack-clack.

I descend step by step, trying to ignore the disgust I taste in my mouth. The wooden clogs hit the landing of the step, I hold on tight to the railing and so I go on until I hear the hit of the clogs on the glass bricks of the landing halfway down. I'll rest a little. Halfway through, eleven steps behind me—another eleven and I'll find myself in front of the door to the studio.

My rest is interrupted by the sudden extinguishing of the light in the staircase. I forgot the lights only stay on for a short time, and in the dark I again feel the

disgust for the floor I'm standing on. The glass bricks radiate cold, the clogs aren't a sufficient defense against it. I rub my face with my palms and make the decision to go back to the apartment. I need to find a way to keep the light in the staircase on.

Clack-clack, clack-clack, clack-clack...

I go into the apartment. I sneak in, I don't want to wake her up. I search for the plastic toolbox. There should be a Phillips head screwdriver in there. I'm losing too much precious time, maybe the voice has quieted itself in the meantime?

I find the screwdriver I'll disassemble the light switch with, so that it'll stay on. I can't go downstairs in the dark, there are too many landings, too much glass and metal in the staircase. I step over the trim again, I close the door behind me and notice that going over the threshold was easier this time. Some fears have been overcome.

Clack-clack, clack-clack...

The sound of the clogs is muted.

I take apart the light switch and reconnect the wires. *What kind of pressure do you feel when the altitude changes? I've been lying down too long. Hurry up. I want to come back up again.*

Clack-clack, clack-clack, clack-clack, clack-clack...

The chirping of wood echoes through the staircase. I'm on the middle landing and despite the clogs I feel that the glass bricks are somewhat warmer. The temperature hasn't changed, but going up and down the stairs has dewed my forehead. The voice repeats the last sentence *I want to come back up again. I want to come back up again. I want to come back up again...* I go down with unexpected speed, the clogs hit my heels, the rhythm is harmonized.

Clack-clack, clack-clack, clack-clack.

The twenty-two steps have been conquered. I look up. The light from the staircase breaks through the glass bricks like the thick leaves of a forest of teak. There is the center of the Sun in each brick and it bursts in unpredictable directions. The surface of the walls are streaked with lines and spots, shadows of different shapes. I could watch this game for hours. There is a galaxy on the wall, but the voice coming from somewhere is more important.

Cautiously I press my ear to the door.

Silence.

I'm sure that the voice is coming from this door, but why can't I hear anything now? I grasp the doorknob and try slowly to open the door. It's locked, I could have guessed that. I hold the screwdriver in my hand, but the tool is useless now.

I'll have to go back to the apartment, cross the thick forest of teak wood, stand on the cold landing, forget my disgust, and find the hammer I have somewhere in the apartment.

Clack-clack, clack-clack, clack-clack.

The image of the hammer completely overtakes my brain.

Clack-clack, clack-clack, clack-clack.

I forget about the landing, the glass bricks, the clog steps. The trim no longer seems any sort of barrier. I put the screwdriver in the sink and look for the hammer. I try to be silent, I don't want to wake her up. I look through the top of the closet, up where dust and damp nest, but I can't think about that now. I open the drawers in the kitchen and stand and look around.

No hammer.

Maybe it's somewhere under the couch. I crouch and look, just dust again. I scour through the cardboard box with sneakers, the little closet in the bathroom, slip my hand into the opening under the tub, nothing.

It's nowhere.

Instead of a hammer I find a hank of dust and never have I understood where all this dust in the apartment comes from. How does it collect and spread so, why doesn't any of it skip over us? The dust is always present like a mantle over us all.

Crazed I walk through the apartment, but quietly; I repeat to myself *Quietly. She's sleeping.*

Dust, I repeat.

Tomorrow I'll need to wipe away what I'm thinking about while I sit on the couch. There is apparently no hammer. Maybe I can use the meat tenderizer?

I look at the clothes I'm wearing. I need to change out of my pajamas, I can't go walking around with a hammer like this. I sneak into the bedroom, find long pants and a T-shirt. She's sleeping, her black hair covering the white pillow. I take off my clogs, get dressed, and while I'm putting on my clogs again I notice that they've broadened a little. Somehow every part of my feet has found its place. There is only one question that occupies my mind: How will I get into the studio?

Before me were endless possibilities changing direction. There wasn't just one, from the earth to the sky. I want to come back up again. I want to come back up again, the voice says.

I take the meat tenderizer and with quick steps leave the apartment. The sun has already come up over the horizon, the light is still on in the staircase. The lines and spots on the surface of the walls are an unrecognizable world that exists independent of me. I don't feel the change of material of the floor. Going down the stairs is like breaking through the canopy of a forest of teak.

Clack-clack, clack-clack, clack-clack...

I press my ear to the door of the studio. Silence.

With the meat tenderizer, I'll destroy this suspicion. With determined movements I hit the lock. It's tough, but I'm persistent. While I break the lock, something in me breaks off, pieces of skin fall off and as they fall they turn into new particles of dust. With every hit I lose weight and the density of my hair. After a few strong swings, the lock falls and the door is left ajar. I push it, it opens in a perfect ninety-degree arc. The smell of thinner and oil paints radiates from the corridor. There is nothing more to hear. The meat tenderizer is still in my right hand.

Before I can step inside, her right hand touches my shoulder.

Clack-clack, clack-clack.

4.

The rain is falling again, snails go into their slimy shells and wait. That's how I listen to her sentences, as though buried somewhere deep in the wood. When she leaves only wood will remain. I've set the water for tea, and watch it boil, put in a teabag, but somewhere on the trip to the table the cup falls and shatters, and the mint tea spills over the wooden floor. I throw a cloth on the green stain and as it absorbs the fluid I pick up the broken bits of porcelain. While she talks about leaving, I think about the fluid and the stain that will remain on the floor.

I firmly grasp the cloth by two ends and squeeze them over the sink as though wringing the neck of a griffon vulture. Water gushes from its mouth. I toss the squeezed-out cloth back onto the floor to soak up the spilled fluid from the mint tea. The green stain is another spot in the wooden living room. Fluid causes wood to expand, I hear it, and she watches my movements and says *It's just for a few months.*

I'm not listening to her, I watch the cloth as it changes color from white to green.

I can't admit to her that, from today's visit, I'll only remember the green stain on the floor. Instead of saying that aloud, what comes out of me is *Think about it a little more, leaving won't solve anything, maybe everything will be fine. You don't always have to be out somewhere. The problem is the days...* and so I got carried away, kept on a monologue in unpredictable directions. *Sometimes we need to make a decision that makes us grit our teeth and have nightmares. Maybe we can still try...*

And I wanted to say a great deal many more words, I have hundreds of empty sentences about wood and how it's expanding while we talk, but I didn't get to say them. She says *A break*, and I don't know what that means. I can't wait for the wood to rot on its own.

Now I need to be careful.

Her leaving means that the ground floor of the house will be left free. Actually,

my problem had always been central—she spends most of her time in the studio, me in the apartment, over me is the sloping roof and I'm sandwiched between two great quantities of wood. When she leaves, all of it will be available to me.

If I decided to leave with her, I'll never be able to fulfill my plan to make something of the wood, the body whose form I still don't know. She was never aware of the full potential of the wood floors of the house anyway. Besides my problem being central, till now it's been physically impossible because I haven't been able to strip the wood floor while she's in the house.

But maybe today the long-awaited change has come. This break, as she calls it, is a good reason to finally get to work.

I'll use the next pause in her monologue, show understanding for the current situation and just incidentally, somewhere before the end, mention that I agree. A break is what we need. It's hard to concentrate, the wood occupies my brain like an incandescent ring, I think about grooves and feathers, joints that need to be covered up.

From time to time I throw in *Leaving isn't a solution*, then I stand up as though I, too, wonder whether a separation is what we need. I look out the window, a ferry emerges from somewhere on the horizon. She pours water into a glass, the sound similar to the screeches of wood as it expands. She says *Sit down*, and I want to walk over the wood and drink in its warmth.

Still, I sit, and lean my elbows on the table. As she repeats the reasons for us moving, in my head I calculate the surface area of the ground and first floor, multiply the cubic capacity of the wood, add and subtract, account for time, the amount of work and its sequence, the wood transforms into a body and grows, grows in my head. If I concentrate hard enough, I can see the contours of what I'll build from the wood, though I still don't know what the final form will look like. I nod along with her sentences, but I would not be able to repeat a single one. I put the ashtray on the table.

I have to collect myself, try to understand what she's saying.

For a moment, the pressure of the wood on my brain subsides. I understand what she is saying, she wants to hear my opinion and use it to clear up the fogged-up parts of our relationship. I deal out a dose of words, with the calm in my voice I show that I am still there, though I am thinking about something else altogether. From time to time I throw in the word *break*, like throwing an insect into a spider's web, only a matter of time until it bites. She doesn't suspect my plan with the wood, and how would she when the wood is laid so unassuming in this floor we still, just for tonight, live on.

We sit at the table like two drowning victims, behind my back is the window and I am not sure if she is looking at me or at the sea. After everything she says

I'm leaving now, and in that moment, the wood starts to burn in my head. The flames spread like a blaze as I look at her dark eyes and hair. I want to get up and say that we can leave this seaside town and house together, leave all this like an unread letter. I wanted to say what has been echoing in my head for days, *Wood is just wood*, but the ferry trumpets its departure and the fire in my head goes out.

I stay seated.

She gets up quickly, gravity suddenly magnifies, months of thinking about moving heaped on her back; talking, persuading, all these things to pick up behind herself press on her as she gets up. There is no one else, there is no person who could throw the orange life vest.

That's that, then, she says.

She closes the door behind her.

I'm overwhelmed by something like a vortex of sand rising to the sea surface and growing into one big wave. Its sound echoes in me like a block of ice sliding from the top of a mountain towards a city and crushing it, crushing it, the gushing of the avalanche shattering clay tiles, glass, furniture, this house, and me.

The wood expands and shrieks. It's the only thing that can fill the void.

5.

For days already it's been raining, drop stuck to drop, bouncing off the asphalt, the stone of the riverfront, the tin of automobiles. There are no shoes my feet could stay dry in. Now I'd want to go walking in rubber boots on the roofs of houses and clean the gutters that are clogged with pine needles, throw them at people instead of stones and be high up so they don't see me as the sharp droplets fall on them.

People disembark the ferry holding umbrellas, I look at their colors, how many of them there are and how outstretched the arms are that carry them. No one opens their umbrella before descending the unloading ramp, as though the sea below them repels droplets.

When the rain finally lets up, the percentage of humidity goes down, and the temperature rises. The snails come out to the wet surface and slither, leaving traces of slime. I have never seen snails on pine bark, but maybe I've never looked carefully enough. The floor of the apartment gathers in on itself, the wood cries out, releasing excess water. I listen how the molecules change their properties. I can't prevent the cries because the temperature is still rising.

If I ventilate the apartment well enough, the cries will at least quiet a little.

I need to be more persistent. Till now, the plan with the wood has only existed as an idea, but I still haven't dedicated enough to it. That's why I'm getting a move on.

I take the pictures down from the walls in the living room. Their places are taken by dustless squares, rectangular proof of how dirty the walls are. I go to the kitchen, rifle through a bag and find white, green, and red chalk. There is also measuring tape. First I'll measure the surface of the apartment. I extend the ruler, wrestling with the corners of the door. I want to be precise, but the geometry of the walls sometimes resists my efforts. With the white chalk on the blue wall I calculate and write *eight hundred and sixty square*, I have to multiply it by

two since I'm also counting the square footage of the ground floor. I write *one thousand seven hundred and twenty*.

The creaking of the wood floor, those cries of the herd of bison still echo from time to time. I combine opening the windows in the kitchen and the living room, trying to create a muffled echo of the cries. I only partially succeed, but enough that they don't interfere with my writing and drawing out the plan that will, it looks like, have three phases.

I draw, calculate, and write down the first phase. I'll start from the ground floor of the house, from her studio. I'll have to take out all the things like I'm taking out piled-up trash. I'll need a day or two for that. I don't know what this indecision is about, I need to be more precise. I'll wipe down the walls for *one-two days*, with the white chalk I write *sixteen hours*. After the trash is taken out, I'll start to *break down the inside walls of the ground floor*. The demolition of the walls mustn't damage the wood floor. I'll *take out the construction waste in white nylon bags*, and then I'll *rest for a day*. The plan needs to include rest days, I mustn't be hasty, I'll need the space and time to think. The body grows weary if it's constantly fixated on a single idea, and rest is an opportunity to confront creation.

The most important thing is to *not damage the boards*, though I still don't know how much wood I will need to build and what I'm building at all. When I take the construction waste out from the apartment, that will be the end of the first phase of the plan. I throw the white chalk to the floor and take up the green. Each phase has its own color.

The implementation must take place *in total secrecy*. No one must know what I'm doing in the house. I'm still not sure which tool I will use to *strip the wood floor*. Pliers are too rough, I could damage the wood. I write a few question marks, I think all that will happen from there on out is a big question mark. When I dismantle the floor of the apartment on the ground floor, the ground will be naked concrete, and all around me a wooden heap of the best teak wood. A dark pool I will be able to jump into headfirst, to the bottom. On the living room wall I finish listing the work I need to do on the ground floor. To the left of the list I write *twice*, because I'll have to repeat all the work on the upper floor. After I dismantle the floors of both storeys, I'll have to *wall up the windows* to avoid the curious glances of passers-by. I'll get *brick blocks, mortar, a trowel, a cement spatula...* I underestimated the length of the list and the number of tasks. There's no more room on the living room walls. I go into the kitchen, there's more of a draught in here and the cries of the wood are quieter.

For the final third of the plan I take the red chalk that leaves legible marks on the white kitchen walls. I notice my handwriting improving, I hold the chalk

more securely, the letters are more resolute. I still struggle with the sketches, they're a little unclear and it's evident that there is still no final form.

The cries from the wood will soon stop as the setting sun pulls out the damp. I can feel in on my heels. I need to keep writing, drawing, I can't focus on the cries.

The third phase of the plan will start once I've stripped all the floors. Only the wooden beams the upper floor is laid on will remain between the ground and first floors. I will be in a great two-story space, the windows on the ground floor will be walled up, and basilica illumination will come through the windows of the upper floor.

For the stripping of the wooden beams I will need to get a *metal scaffolding*. Pulling them from the walls and lowering them onto the ground will be the most physically demanding part of the plan. I'm not sure how heavy they are or how I will lower them, I still don't know the answers to a number of problems. I write, *two hand winches* and I sketch how I'll fasten them to the walls, thread the ropes, fix the ends and slowly bring the beams to the base of the ground floor. I don't know if I will need help. Maybe working with wood is beyond my physical capabilities, but I have to try.

I write *clean and process the beams, get tools for woodworking*. The list is growing on all sides. I don't know if I have enough space on the walls of the apartment. Where will the list go once I've stripped the walls?

I need a break. I walk around the apartment, look at the list, the sketches, I try to imagine the wood body, see its curves and the finesse of the craftsmanship. The cries of the wood have quieted. The silence makes me think of what the construction will bring, what I'm moving away from, and whether something ought to have been different. Am I ready to begin this work?

The walking and thinking about wood is interrupted by a loud fluttering of wings and a dull thud. I go to the living room, where a bird is lying in the middle. A pretty black swift, soft and unconscious on the wooden floor.

The unexpected guest has disturbed the peace. Is it alive? I don't want to touch the soft features, risk a peck to the eyes. It rouses itself. It turns to me and looks like it doesn't believe what it's seeing. Its claws dig into the wood, I think of the marks they'll leave and how deep they are. It must be looking at me because it can't read what's written on the walls.

What do I do?

Cautiously I head to the kitchen. I turn my back to it, it probably won't follow me. I take the cloth from the sink, grasp two sides and wave it at the bird. With the rag I simulate the flight of a predator that will force the swift to fly out the

window. It stands on the wood floor and watches. It sees a man convincing himself that he's doing the right thing. He thinks that he's got things under control and that this thing with the wood is the way to move forward, but this man is slowly losing his footing and sits on the floor.

The swift moves its head left-right, scrutinizing my physiognomy. How much fatigue has accumulated in its hollow bones, can it go on flying? It spreads its wings as though to fly toward me, and then it turns and the flutter of wings echoes though the living room.

When it finally flew off, it looked like it was flying away from the ocean.

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