

IN LATE SUMMER

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BLOWFLY

My mother had already gotten up. Next to me in the bed, her body's imprint; it no longer smells of rose and sweetened, boiled milk. The smell of soot, rancid oil and moisture was still seeping into us, in our great aunt's house. On the pillow are long black hairs.

The morning is completely quiet, I don't hear any clanging of pots and rustlings of bags in the hallway, though I know that my mother and Grandma are getting ready to go home. We will stay only one day. Summer has drawn to a close, and now the greenhouses and orchards are become overripe. Should rain fall, all will rot. Anyway, we have nothing for winter. We'll make tomato sauce. They said it's calm and safe in our village, but that we have to return before dark.

From the bed I see that the window's open, but the light spring curtain is drawn over it. It's full of birds with pointed beaks flying towards the land, and flowers which bloom inversely. Somebody sewed it wrong. Between my mother's hairs on the pillow, the blowfly makes its landings. The hairs are long blowfly legs. They've occupied the whole pillow.

Do you see how its red eyes wax?

I beat the pillow with my hand. The blowfly buzzes past my ear, and disappears.

I get up and pull back the spring curtain. The little hooks scrape on the rusty cornice, like eyelashes on the pillow case. Both the birds and the flowers are disappearing. The clouds are rosy. Puffy cotton candy. Behind them, red untroubled sky. Grandma says that ruddy sky bodes bad weather, but all is peaceful. Crows fly in big murders across the fields, and over our forests, far off and dark.

A dress is thrown over the chair. White, worn-out cotton is a gauze which my mother strains soup through. I see my whole self, in the mirror next to the wardrobe. Growth-wise, I am a little short of my mother's height. But I've already overtaken grandma. My skin and hair white as the feathers from my mother's pillow. Fenugreek from the fields on my chest. On my shoulders, I have bound my dress in knots.

The front doors are opened. My mother has left her purse and shopping bags on the hallway floor. We're ready for departure. We are taking nothing but pots and jars. I'll take Sivka too, I am worried she might think that we've abandoned her, and then will get lost if she tries to find us. Grandma sits on the veranda in the flowery dress and black sandals she wears to mass. Sivka jumps into a basket.

My brother loads the purse and shopping bags into the trunk. He's still walking round bare

to the waist. Our mother gives him a t-shirt, but he just balls it up and throws it in the car.

My mother and I sit in the back. Sivka between us. Grandma sits down, and the red Lada rocks.

My brother turns the key, and the engine roars. Grandma crosses herself.

UNWASHED QUINCES

You cannot fit into the old Lada. You look in through the window a little. Grandma has taken up all the space, breathed in all the air. With her kerchief she wipes the sweat from her face and bald head. From the lacerated seats, dust and pieces of yellow sponge are scattered around, and stick to our sweaty skin. Our hands are just-picked, hairy quinces.

We don't open the windows, because flurries of soft, golden dust are churned up under the wheels from the fields' byway. Granny is panting more than when she led me by the hand across the railway bridge. She squeezes the handhold below the window. Her fingers are white as my brother's on the steering wheel. He's just sixteen and still has not passed his driving test, but our father lets him drive around the village. All of us get out of the way, off the road, and he gets the car stuck in the garden only once, in Grandma's potatoes.

My mother falls silent, her gaze dwells on the dried-out corn stubble fields and sunflowers. There where, in late afternoons, yellow fades away into orange. From the riverbank a murder of crows takes off and touches down on the stalks. The dry cabbage is taken up by their talons. You can hear how they are scraping with spruce needles on the rasping leaves, pecking at the half-dry, sun-burnt yellow grain. My mother doesn't see what's disturbed the birds, as they loudly caw, rise up and form rows on the wires above the railway tracks. Her fingers press the floral petals on the hem of her dress. A blowfly starts to buzz by my ear. I swat my hand, and she disappears into my mother's hair. She glows, in neon-green and blue. The drop of sweat along the hairline is cold as well water.

The fields' byway follows the crooked railway track overgrown with wild angelica, dark blue blackberries and danewort. From the railway crossing the village can be seen. It seems to me that the trees have doubled, and the forest dropped right down to the road. I'd be able to touch it if I were to open the window and stretch out my arm. We cross over the crossing and I open the window. And it's still dusty. My mother grabs me by the hand. I feel how authority flows under her skin. Grandma begins to shout out. Not to let me push my head through the window, I'll fall out and be dead on the spot.

The Lada dashes curtly down the road and turns between the two tall pines. It comes down the drive and halts between ours and Grandma's house. I see my aunt as she washes the windows, standing on a chair. Grandma once more wipes her head and sighs. We will suffocate, one by one, if we don't open the window soon. I am itching to get out because I am worried that Sivka can't breathe either. My aunt spots us and waves. Across the road, Ilonka and Karlo are stacking wood for sawing. They make a racket whenever they speak.

Grandad steps out of the cellar. He too has sprouted, like the hedge and forest. Because of the hair, eyebrows and beard, I don't see his face. He's as sable and cold as the cellar. Grandma thinks of how he's the same as on that day in the photo studio. Upright back, shoulders broad. A head of hair like the crown of a tree. Fountain grass under his shirt. Bursting through the fabric.

Grandma folds her kerchief into a triangle, and ties it round her head. She never knotted a tighter knot.

CAMOMILE FLOWERS

My mother takes down the spring curtains from the windows in the kitchen and living room. Once we've already arrived, she will freshen up the house. The once-white lace has been blackened by motionlessness, and by smoke from the oil lamp. When there is enough hot water, my mother brings it in pots from the summer kitchen. We submerge the curtains, and the water darkens that very instant. We scrub them with pieces of laundry soap. Black water trickles down our arms, stinking of smoke and dust. But all the lace is whiter and more delicate, thin like Grandma's veil in her wedding picture. We rinse them out with cold well water. From which the skin is rouged, the cold reaching through to the bones. My mother spreads them out on the line stretched in the meadow beyond the house. In the middle it is held up by a long, bifurcated pole. The sun mixes with the smell of soap.

Julia and I lie on the unfolded couch. My throat is still hurting me from my father's finger. My mother and I have stopped crying. She has hidden all the hard bonbons. She won't give any to either me or my brother, though he swears he will eat the bonbons sitting down. We have slept in late, the sun came up long ago. Over the living room window, there is no spring curtain, just the forest and the white lace on the line through the glimmering glass. I get up, and go barefoot into the yard. Julia is holding my hand. We will sprint into the lace, like into a white sheet which is flying in the air. It smells differently from the ones washed with the laundry soap. It smells of white powder, and of field flowers from the pink bottle of fabric softener. That's how my wedding veil will smell. In my wedding picture, the veil will swell in the breeze, thin as a breath. We are lying down in the grass. Up there, high in the sky, a white line is being etched. Julia and I shout:

Planes, planes, they're dropping bonbons on us.

In the bathroom it's warm, from the steam and my mother's sweat. There is still water in a pot. My mother is bringing a little pot from the kitchen. I untie my hair, and bend over the tub. My mother pours, and scrubs with laundry soap like she did with the spring curtains, until her knuckles start cracking. From the pantry, she brings out a jar with dried camomile flowers. She shakes them out into the wash basin, and they transfuse with hot water. She cools the tea, and with it she rinses my skin. From this, it will stay white as bone. I wrap my head in a towel. I close the jar, and return it to the pantry, to the shelf. In there it is always dark. It's under the stairs, and without a window, and the bulb beside the door is now useless. The pantry too now

smells of before. Of caramel, lemon crusts and vanilla sugar. Like coming up to Christmas.

I push myself up with my toes and turn on the light in the pantry. I leave Julia on the stairs. Pieces of sugared quince and black cherries are floating in the jars on the highest shelf. My mother serves these with coffee, in small crystal vessels. Below these, sour peppers and grated cabbage. Tiny green tomatoes and big cucumbers. On the table, under cloths, Christmas paw-shaped cookies. These smell of fat and sugar. Mini-croissants with little berries powdered with sugar. Under plastic covers, lemon squares and chocolate tart. My stomach is full. I wipe my mouth and fingers on my dress. Julia watches me from the threshold. She won't inform on me. I unfold a chair beyond the house, next to the clothesline with the curtains. I take off the wet towel, and disentangle my hair. It smells of camomile. My hair dries fast in the sun. It soughs like the lace. Dry snow from the fields.

APPLES

The bear-paw scratches on Grandpa's beard. Sandpaper on old wood.

"Come here!"

The cellar doors are wide open. From inside, the smell of rakija, moisture and dust gushes out. On the table by the wall is a pile of dirty dishes. On the plates, dried-out remnants of food. Greasy forks and knives. Bread crumbs everywhere. Grandpa's dirty clothes tossed on Grandma's couch, and crumpled bedlinen on the other one. When he's not needed for guard duty, Grandpa sleeps in the cellar. During the day, he oversees the trench-digging in the forest.

Next to the glass case, the smell of rakija is even stronger. Glass bottles are lined up next to it, empty, the corks strewn on the floor. Granddad sweeps them away with his foot and swears. He pushes the glass of the cabinet and takes out two garden apples. The first which fell from the branch this year.

"Go on, take one. Offer one to Dunja."

Dunja, Julija and me are under the apple tree. The wooden bench is our bus, Dunja is driving us from one big city to another. Zagreb, Ljubljana, Belgrade. When we move away from home, we'll go there together. In beautiful dresses and shoes with ribbons, we'll sit on hotel terraces in the city centre, eating cakes and listening to music. The streets of the big cities are spacious, with fountains and lines of trees. There we can forget the muddy byways and rutted highway.

Grandpa's teeth flash in the dark of the cellar. His green eyes sparkle. Granddad is growing, broken through the ceiling, filling up the whole cellar. The roof will collapse in on us. I take the apples and run out of the cellar.

The sun takes the cold and dark off me. I run down the road, to Dunja.

The thick warm juice bursts in our mouths.

BLACKBERRIES

A splash in the pond behind us. It splatters the bare skin. Dunja taps away with her fingers on the bottom of the plastic washbasin, like on a drum. Her hands are delicate, like the little white lines on her blue vest. She is pulling out tortoises, from the brushwood next to the tracks. On her palm, they pull their soft heads into their shells. In the wash basin, the tortoises are a black rockpile. We leave them next to the track. They peep out their heads, futilely trying to get up the plastic wall. The track is infinitely long. We take off our slippers, and walk along the rails, as if on a balancing beam. The iron heat scalds us, so we have to be quick. I don't last long, and the slippers' rubber is pleasant on the skin. Dunja speeds along, I can't catch up with her.

In early Spring purple irises bloom by the tracks. And wild sword lilies. They make you think of bouquets of big butterflies. We don't have a car, and so we go to the neighbouring village by railway track, much closer that way than by the highway. My mother and me are in front of my father and brother. She holds me by the hand, and lifts me up as I jump from sleeper to sleeper. A train is behind us, still far off, but we feel the railway stone tremble. We alight from the track and stop by a hedge. The thundering is getting stronger. The locomotive hisses. My mother and father open their coats for us. My brother and I hide in the warm darkness, in the silence. The world rumbles outside of the coats.

The blackberries fall into our palms from touch alone. We pick only those exposed to the sun. The hedge is cold on the inside, and hisses. Our hands are blue and sticky. The sweet-and-sour red juice flows in our throats. Fingerprints on white cotton. These cannot be washed out of a dress.

Dunja in the sun is like a new-born mouse. Under her thin skin, I can see every vein. If I could lift her up towards the sun, I am sure I would be able to see her heart beating. She laughs. From the blackberries, her teeth are blue as Sivka's when she leaves a throttled mouse for us in front of the door.

Trains have not come this way for a long time. I have to close my eyes for the thundering to start.

In school we are reading a story about a blind boy. His house is next to a railway track, and he too is used to the thundering of trains, like us. He stands in front of his house and waves at the travellers. He doesn't know that they wave back. I wonder what the world is like in

darkness. Maybe for the blind boy, it's always like it is for me in my mother's coat. I stand at the pond and wait for the next train. I close my eyes and wave. I am curious, and peep out through my eyelashes. At the windows, nobody is waving back.

We sit on the railway stone in front of old Feriz's house. Two grey cats are reposing in front of it. Their bodies are thin, and they are breathing slowly. The windows of the house are screened off with white sheets. The doors are shut. The door glass is diagonally cracked, sticky brown tape holding it together. Yellow dandelions peek through the rain-rotted concrete door frame. The dried-out corn-stubble field behind the house doesn't rustle. It's motionless and mute. Soldiers in formation. On the black cable of the powerline, above the haystack, glimmering crows are queued.

CHICKENS

The boxes cheep in Grandma's hands. Sharp, three-toed little legs scrape on old newspaper. The sardine tins, filled with water and cornflour, have rusted. Grandma takes a chick and puts it in my palm. Down of reedmace. The fragile little legs are cold, and sharp. Grandma hides the chickens from the rats. They can eat a whole chicken. We're all afraid of rats. Even Grandpa.

From the decaying floor in the bedroom, in lieu of a house mouse, a rat wriggled out. Big as a rabbit. Grandma's on the bed. She doesn't move. Grandpa growls. The rat spits, cornered in a nook. Nowhere to go. Grandpa feels its weight on his trouser legs. He kicks the floor. It's already on his shoulder. Behind his neck. It bites him, with its long sharp teeth. Grandpa roars. He swings at the air with his bear-paw.

Grandma is shaking with laughter on the bed. Her two gold teeth scintillating.

Grandma wipes away her tears of laughter.

"Careful Sivka doesn't strangle them."

INTO A SEETHING POT

My mother picks tomatoes in the garden. Her legs are dusty up to the knees, up to the hem of her dress. The tomato stalks and leaves are yellow and withered, the sharp smell which gushes out of them when they're fresh scarcely perceptible now, though they're just as prickly. The tomatoes come in all sizes, colours and shapes. From light green, through yellow, to dark red. The buckets are full of them. My mother throws the big, slightly rotten heads onto a pile by the edge of the garden. They split and spill out. Look, the blowflies are coming in! Do you hear the buzzing? They're landing on the split-open pile. It's already black as a hummock of earth.

In front of the house, my brother has kindled a fire under the pot. The flames crackle and lick the sooty sides. Although he has walked around without a t-shirt for the whole summer, he is still white as lily petals. I've washed out the old marmalade jars and turned them over to dry on an old tablecloth. When they are completely dry, I line them up in a baking dish, and put it in a hot oven so that they heat up.

My mother sits next to the house in a draped dress, a bucket full of red juice between her widened legs. Seeds and pieces of skin are floating in it. Over the black washtub with the tomato juice, the knife in my mother's hand cuts through the over-ripe, bruised flesh. It has gotten in under her nails, red droplets trickling down to her elbows. Her skin is glistening. It's buzzing louder and louder. My brother tilts the full bucket of cut-up tomato into the pot and stirs with a piece of wood. The juice quickly starts boiling and thickening. The air barely breaks through to the surface. Hot droplets of sauce splutter out from the pot, like from a volcano, and fall on the dry, thinned-out grass. Beetles and ants flee as if from fire.

My mother fills the jars, just taken out of the oven, the clean glass flashing in the sun. She covers their tops with cellophane, then the lids over that. I stack them on a shelf in the pantry.

Grandma brings out a tray with coffee, to the table under the apple tree.

THE RUMBLE

Get ready, we are running out of time. Silence and summertime slowness will only last a little longer.

Deep in the forest it's dark and cold, even in summer. The black earth moist, the moss a green carpet. Steps are inaudible there. The soft flight of the eagle owl. The big strokes whip the air into a whoosh. Birds, foxes, rabbits flee it. Under the ribbed soles of tightly-tied boots, the crushed flesh of poisonous mushrooms. Alluring, sweet aromas evaporate out of the conifers. The resin is warm and sticky, like the hot wax-drops from our ship-shaped candles. In the forest dark, their eyes are mute. And wide open.

Their steps rustle at the rim of the forest, in the vipers' thick cold bracken. Between chestnut trees and oaks. There the air is lighter. Diaphanous and flickering. A hellish rumble slits through it, reminiscent of the Bosna's burble below the railway sleepers, of the roar of the monsters out of Ilonka's stories.

The sky dissipates with the first sparks, and the smell of gunpowder. The birds' wings disappear in the smoke, as if into thick morning mist. Grandpa's bear-paw grabs Grandma's forearm. Grandma is uncoordinated and having difficulty, stumbling in front of the cellar. Her moccasins fall off her. Grandpa locks up. The Turkish-coffee cups of undrunk-coffee stay behind, under the apple tree.

In front of Ilonka's house, half-cut wood. The iron saw left wedged-into the wood. Karlo's cup of milk on the concrete in front of the door. Ilonka and Karlo are locked in the house. Cloistered in the wardrobe. It's tight for the two of them. The cloth of old coats is falling onto their heads. Their breath is mixing. Ilonka squeezes Karlo, she can't calm her quivering body. The boys are thin brushwood. Fear a storm wind. Which they can do nothing against. Litanies flow from Karlo's mouth.

My mother squeezes the hem of her dress. She knows that it's getting late. She doesn't recognise the voices floating from the highway. She wheels around in the yard, but doesn't see either my brother or me. She runs to the house.

I am four years old, and my brother six. We are sitting in the dark, in the wood shed. We have broken a bottle of strawberry syrup in the kitchen. The thick syrup poured out over the tiles and rug. We tramped on it with our bare feet. And left prints all over the whole house. Our mother will yell at us. We hear her shouting for us. We stay sitting in the dark, because if we come out now, she will snap off a withe. Now Grandma is summoning us too. Our mother's voice is shaking. She has burst into tears. We are crying too.

They have already deployed around the village. The women in the yards of the houses by the forest didn't manage to escape. They are driving them forwards in front of themselves. And these women are squeezing their children's hands in their own. They've come all the way down to the tracks. The birds on the black cable over Feriz's house spread their wings, and disappear into nests under the roofs. The cats climb the tall walnut tree. The corn stubble field behind the house is rustling. The stalks are felled like dominoes.

They are fast as worms in a tin of meat pieces. The insides of houses reverberate with echoes and curses. They are banging on the walls. Bodies are huddled together under beds, behind doors, in wardrobes and pantries. In vain. They pull them out, like rabbits from a bush.

Their male bodies are aggressive, and don't hesitate. The onslaught is heated and loud. Throats grow dry from it. In the kitchens, on the tables, are bowls full of tomatoes. They bite them, and the membrane splits. Red juice explodes, filled with seeds. And they throw the bitten tomatoes on the floor. Trampled hearts.

CONCRETE DUST

Although it burns on the inside, on the outside fear is cold. His lips are pale and dry. His forehead grown cold with dew. The swearing and spit being thrown in his face are widening his eyes. His sense of hearing is sharpened. His ears are bursting from unknown sounds. It's clear that the creak of the stairs and clang of metal announces death.

And so, a quiet song. Cats' paws on the carpet.

Get up, dear one, beautiful one, and come

Because winter has passed, rain has ceased.

"Nobody must hear you," says my mother.

The women in the village wear mourning dress. In the mornings, they drink tea, made from pennyroyal. Dunja says that we are lucky, because we have plenty of pennyroyal. It grows like a weed along the pond. The women pick it on sunny days, when it's dry. Wet flowers rot quickly. They spread it out on a clean sheet. Grandma says that this herb treats sorrow. You just need to drink it regularly.

The kitchen's filled with sunlight. The windows are still without spring curtains. They remain hanging, on the line above the house. I take the broomstick from behind the door, and take off into the thick, flickering cloud.

If the wall clock were working, it would show exactly 5 pm.

My mother's hand is coarse. She has grabbed me by the knuckles and is pulling me down the dark corridor and up the stairs. The emptiness is echoing. We say nothing. We lie on the floor by the wall. Our cheeks are on the uneven concrete. The minute concrete dust is streaming up our nostrils. My brother is not there. He stayed downstairs. Can't he hear that the sky has fallen on us? My mother clasps her arm over my back. But you cannot save a child with a hug. She doesn't cry, but her eyes glisten with drops. Tears have been spilling out from my eyes. A tiny little pool. The dust does not allow it to be absorbed into the cold concrete. Downpour on the tin roof. Hail. The pigeons' coo is not to be heard.

My brother and a soldier with a black band around his head see each other through the big window in the kitchen. A fraction of a second. His image is etched into my brother's mind. The charcoal eyes, the weak beard. The long, wet hair flutters round the black band. His shot misses my brother. It breaks the glass and penetrates the back of the green armchair. My brother flees through the dark corridor. The soldier with the black headband is waiting for him at the open

front door.

“Hands behind your head!”

My brother stands on the threshold. He is naked down to the waist. Panting and pale. His chest is heaving. His light armpit hair is wet. Beads flowing out of them. Behind the soldier with the black band, my brother sees Grandpa. A green eye takes aim. Grandpa’s bear-paw doesn’t hesitate. The soldier’s charcoal eyes open wide for a second. His mouth opens. His rifle falls on the concrete. He starts staggering and crumples to the ground. Grandpa disappears into the cellar. A split second. My brother is not sure if Grandpa had stood in front of the cellar at all. The soldier had fallen face-first onto the ground. A big hole in his back. His shirt a little burnt. The blood was thick and dark. Spilling out over the concrete. The doors stay open. My mother and I hear my brother climbing up. He skips a few steps. Our hearts beat on the concrete. We are breathing fast. My brother lies down on the floor. Our guts are full of dust and fear.

A female voice calls my mother. Louder and louder.

“Come out! They won’t do anything to us!”

My mother recognises the voices of women from the village. My brother says not to go down. My mother’s hair shines even brighter, and the buzzing loudens. Her face is dark. Blotches are cropping up on her skin. As on rainy days.

Silence reigns, and the window panes are at ease.

We can hear them well. Hard steps on the wooden stairs. The wood has never creaked like that. Metal clangs. My mother and brother pull themselves up. I see my mother’s bare feet and my brother’s trainers.

And tightly-tied black boots.

This can only be Death.

“Get up!”

The sound is painful. You cannot uproot it from your ears. More painful than a blade in the flesh.

And so a silent song. Cats’ paws on the carpet.

The flowers are coming alive,

The turtle-dove can be heard,

The time for singing is nigh.

ASTER FLOWERS

Death is behind my back. My mother squeezes me by the hand. She'll crush my every bone. We are barefoot, they left our slippers on the concrete below the window. There, where the smells of concrete dust and camomile flowers mix. Dark blood in front of the door. Somebody has taken the soldier away. But his black band remained next to the puddle. We step into the puddle with our bare feet, like into that thick sticky strawberry syrup. And we leave tracks behind ourselves. Here, the smells are quite different. I don't detect concrete and dust, but iron, sweat and smoke.

Do you feel the cold fear leading?

Old, hanging faces are already lined-up along the road. Their hands are behind their heads.

And summer ... still peaceful and flickering. Would it save us if the earth were to tremble and open up? If lightning were to strike the field and set fire to the dry grass, hedges and trees? If squalls of storm-winds were to shower dust into our eyes. Then, we would be equally little. Death and I.

Saliva is flying out of their mouths, like with chained-up, grown-wild dogs. Their voices rend the skin from the body. Their breathing deep and cold as a basement. Their inner selves rotten as old potatoes.

My brother's voice is a child's. The knife glints at his throat. Spittle and curses flying into his face. His eyes are thrown open, and dumb. He thinks that he'll feel nothing, only the touch of the metal on the skin. A child under the knife is a wind-swept birch.

A black boot sends the chicken boxes flying. High, to the roof. Like Dunja and I jumping the bonfires. Yellow feathers in the air. On the ground, they crush them one by one. Turn them into yellow-red aster flowers.

There is less and less air. Our breathe is rattling, hoarse. Short and dry. Birds' claws are grabbing at our backs, and hungry pointed beaks. Zeal is striking the napes of our necks.

Silence in one flicker of an eye.

Underneath Grandma's apple tree, Death emerges. Hisses. Leans his leg on the wooden bench. The rose petals by the fence, on the prickly bush, are fully opened. An army of ants moving in between the sugar cubes.

TELL SUMMER THAT I DIED

*When gladness sweeps the land,
And to the white sky
Cool butterflies go by,
And sheep in shadow stand;
When Love, the old command,
Turns every hate aside,
In the unstinted days
Tell Summer that I died.*

John Shaw Neilson

Stop for a minute! Just one more minute!

Look at the face. This cannot be a face of Death. It's pale and gentle. Above the lip, a scar. Death is a boy. His mother is calling him, and he offers her his hand.

He is running.

His little shoes get stuck in the stone in the yard. He's still far off, his mother cannot grab a hold of him.

Mum! Mum!

Above his head, the round fruits are blushing. Golden, like on the prayer rug on the wall in my great-aunt's room. His eyes are shaded. Will his hood fall off and eyes be uncovered? Does he see us clearly in the hot trembling air? Are we just turbid flecks to him? Unsuccessful photos from my father's polaroid?

I am the shortest one in the line. All heads are turned towards me. Like flowers towards the sun. I am standing between my mother and my brother. I am touching their elbows. My brother's warm, bare skin and my mother's flowery dress. We're in a snare. There's nowhere to escape to. Behind our backs, the pitiless spruce branches. They have no tree tops to hide in. They smack into our backs, and our bare hands behind our heads. Up ahead, barbed wire blooms. And a red-hot metal artillery piece.

Death bends his back a little. Narrows his eyes and cold teeth. "Mum! Mum!"

I flee into her thrown-open coat. Into the smell of dried flowers. Into the warm silence.

At dawn, when it's bitter cold, my mother presses my hand into her pocket.

In my mouth, the crispy biscuit dissolves from the hot milk. My fingers smell of coconut flour.

Hide yourself!

Under the table! Below the bed. In the pantry! In the dark!

Curl up and close your eyes.

Nobody's able to find me.

Into the coat! Into the warm silence!

The lips of Death turn white. The index finger is used to the touch of metal. It doesn't hesitate.

Amid the howls and raining fire, the petals of Grandma's blooming roses fall down into the grass. Blown loose in an instant. Do you hear how the bodies bluntly fall on the dusty road? They are in unimaginable positions. The dead don't shut their eyes. They are stuck fast, like Julia's.

One spark hit me straight on. Right in the heart. My mother hears me calling her.

"Mum! Mum!"

Quietly, like the gentlest song. She does not know that I am shouting. You will be deafened by my scream!

It spills out through the forest and fields.

Do you hear it?

It's in the fluttering of birds' wings, in the wind which moans through open windows. In the creaking of wood underfoot, in the metal clang.

Camomile was strewn round the dusty road, and snuffed out. The eyes are two blue marbles. The sky is the last which I see. Tainted with smoke, and alien voices.

Grandma's kerchief lands on us in sorrow.

My mother's hair is dissipated by thick swarms of big blowflies.

They eat at our open wounds.

Does summer know?

Can it, instead of these, send any butterfly at all?

Has anybody told Summer that I died?

ANGEL

You need a break. I know.

The throat has tightened, is crying out for fresh air. You throw the windows wide open, or stretch out in front of the house in the cold, under some dense tree tops. You undress, and jump into a lake or river. You metamorphosise, into a fish, and vanish below the surface.

You forget for the moment. But only for a moment. Still nothing is complete. You stand back, so as to see better. And the smoke has been dispersed.

Our road looks like a field after a storm. A hundred thunder strikes have fallen on it. Rain and hail have felled the stalks. All the juices have drained out of them. This is your chance to see what's hidden on the inside.

We are cast out without order, like when you throw a fistful of corn kernels in front of the chickens. You will immediately catch sight of me. White hair. White skin. White dress. My mother will later assert that the blotch on my chest looked like a flower. A big red flower.

A white angel, with a flower on the chest.

Does the red blotch on the chest look to you like a flower?

Not to me. It's burnt skin. Blood blackening on thin cotton, like a gauze. Shattered bone and rent lungs. An exploded heart.

Look around, everything is wrecked and motionless, and only Death stands upright, below Grandma's apple tree. And still his eyes are not to be seen, thanks to the slanted hood.

GREEN EYE

Grandma in the dark is a ball of wool thrown between the couch and the wooden glass case. She moans helplessly. Fear diminishes her body. People don't have shells to hide their heads in, like tortoises. All they can do is draw in their necks a little, bow their heads and shoulders to cover their eyes. The walls of the cellar are strained by the howls and curses penetrating through the open windows. The wooden glass case trembles. The glasses clink.

Grandpa is for a minute at one, then a minute at another window. He says nothing. All the lightning and curses sparkle in his eye. Grandma hears them, even when they are mute. It's only the thunder which strikes in the field, so loud and resolute. The louder the thunder, the quieter and quicker Grandma's prayer. The words must be fast, they must not be left to hang in the air, so as to not decay like the dust.

Grandpa's bear-paw pulls both triggers at the same time. Through the holes between the sandbags, he fires two lead loads. They are faster than Grandma's prayer. They penetrate the gentle face of Death. Who tumbles into the grass by the wooden bench. The hood falls from the head.

And Death has blue eyes. Look! The golden fruits of the garden's apple tree tremble in the pupils. The leaves flutter and rustle. The fresh wounds are hot. Black cooled-down coffee pours into them from the oilskin tablecloth.

Death is a boy again.

"Mum! Mum!"

KALEIDOSCOPE

Shut your eyes, live among the dead!

Inhale deeply, and restrain your limbs. The pause lasts only an instant.

Black queen one, two, three ... !

My brother, through his eyelashes, sees the scratched black boot. Trampled in blood. In my blood. He feels someone's breath on his neck. Stooped down so close.

"They're all finished in here!"

That's what he said. My brother knows this well. The words collide in his head. They grate! They rattle! They are an un-swallowed mouthful. A hard fruit bonbon in the throat.

Some pebbles are sent flying by the boot, and hit him in the face. He opens his eyes. The voices are withdrawing. They are already under the forest. In front of themselves, they lead on the living others. They carry their own dead on their backs.

My brother first of all sees a dirtied tuft of my hair, and then the motionless face. He presses and opens up his eyes, as if with a new blink, everything will disappear. He lifts himself up onto his knees.

It's summer. My brother is ten years old. Like every year, Poles have come to the village. They park on our playground. They throw open their luggage and set up little tents. They sell everything, as if at a market. Clothes, toys, jigsaws. My mother bought me pink trousers and a little plastic kaleidoscope. I carry it around my neck. I lie down in the yard, in the grass, and turn it towards the sun. The colours overflow. Yellow and red. Blue and green. Purple. The most beautiful weave I have ever seen. My brother wrenches it off me and runs off. I cry until night-time.

The picture revolves before my brother's eyes, with unimaginable speed. Whose is that cruel hand?

Frozen blue eyes.

Strewn-around hair.

White cotton soaked in blood.

Torn-up lungs.

Pieces of brain in warm puddles.

Holes in breasts.

Smashed bones.

His eyes are swimming. All has turned into a bloody watercolour!

He tears his hair with the pain. The scream is loud as a train's thunder. My mother opens

her eyes and pulls him by the hand.

“Lie down! They’ll kill you too!”

My brother looks at his own extended hands. They are full of blond hairs.

He touches his chest. All the blood on him is from others. He is untouched.

But my mother’s right leg is holed.

The air again begins to burst. He lies down and covers his head with his arms. He crawls. Yellow dust under his nails. He is all bruised and scratched. My brother’s hands leave behind red traces on the walls of our house. He roars and throws things over. Boxes fall out of the wardrobe. Coils of white cotton. Cold scissors. He goes back to our mother and bandages her leg.

Our mother cannot feel her leg or her body. She can’t move. She holds out her arm towards me, but is unable to reach me.

For a moment, she closes her eyes and rocks me in her arms.

My mother again smells of roses and sweetened, boiled milk.

RED ROSES

Grandpa comes out of the cellar, but Grandma stays balled up between the glass cabinet and the couch. My brother and granddad load my mother onto a wheelbarrow. My brother pushes her down the road towards Dunja's house. There help has already arrived. Our mother, for a moment, sees a piece of sky, my brother's sweaty face and contracted eyes, but then the moment completely darkens before her eyes, until her body completely droops.

Instead of stretchers, they load the injured onto doors taken off the hinges, and laid-down ladders. The holes in the body are covered with crumpled-up t-shirts and shirts, the wounds dressed with unseamed cotton. Down, below the railway there are medics.

Grandma gets up and peers out through the hole in the window which looks out on our road.

The spilled blood will not cool. My brother's knees are dipped in a puddle. He is kneeling next to me, but does not touch me. His hands are trembling as if they have just been lashed, he is trying to lower them onto my face. Can dead eyes be shut? They still scintillate, like marbles turned towards the sun.

I no longer hear anything except my brother.

He howls like Grandpa, deeply and darkly. Tears trickle from his face, dripping from his chin to his chest and leaving white wet tracks. They meander like earthworms. His palms cover my face. As if his skin were scorched, he does not feel the touch of my skin. He only manages to half close the eyes. They are left half open, like wet lips.

He lifts me up in his arms. Like when I tore my knee on the tip of a green rock. My hair hangs down his arm. My brother's temples are pulsating, his eyes blooming with burst capillaries. Like when you touch, with your boot, the delicate ice on a puddle.

Grandma comes out of the cellar and sits on the well. She quietly moans. Nothing remains of her prayers. Grandpa's bear-paw lowered on her shoulder.

The dried sunflowers by the road observe us. Extinguished suns of late summer. My brother's legs didn't buckle once. He puts me down on the grass. There, where I sunbathed with Dunja, on big beach towels, and where we eavesdropped on the murmurs in the big shells, from the cabinet with the crystal ornaments.

The doors of the house are open. My brother takes the spring curtain off the window in the kitchen. Our forest is burning in him. On his face, the colours melt. He is all aglow, like when preparing to leap a blazing bonfire. The curtain smells of soap and fresh air. He brings it out to the yard and wraps me in roses of lace.

In an instant, they bloom red.

BIRDS

A rain of white-hot suns fell down on our forest. On the blackish fragrant conifers. Fire is a gentle lover. It hisses and creeps along the spines of the tall pines. It swallows the birds' nests in one mouthful. Birds, just lain-down, converted into ash. Black cotton. The night wind throws them on the village. Onto the thick bloody puddles and silenced roofs.

In place of flowers.

OVER THE BOSNA

The army is coming!

That's all Dunja is hearing. She looks at her mother as she peeps behind the curtain over the kitchen window. It faces towards the highway, towards ours and Grandma's house. She sees them as they arrive from the upper part of the village, descend onto the highway and down our road. She cannot discern their words, in her ears is the echo of unknown voices. They reverberate in her head, shake the glass in the windows. They lock up and hide under the stairs in the corridor. Dunja doesn't cry, but her face does change colour. Red changes to purple. Purple to green. It stays pale green, like an unripe tomato.

Fear shakes in my aunt's voice.

"Everything will be ok. If they come, you just stay quiet."

Dunja's hands shake. Like when you fall on frozen-over concrete. Her teeth chatter.

The front doors are metal, with little glass windows. Fists pound.

"Open up! Open up!"

My aunt gets up and peeps out. She knows every soldier. They are not in uniforms, but they have rifles. There is an army base in the village, in an abandoned house. One of them is lying before the doors. He is injured, in the leg, and is bleeding onto the concrete. Dunja isn't able to move her gaze away from the wound. My aunt squeezes her hand. They stop by the edge of the house. One of the soldiers starts shooting in the direction of the highway, and another gives them a signal to run across the road. First Dunja, then my aunt. An uncut meadow separates them from Ilonka's yard. They crawl through the tall grass. It's sharp, and dry. It smells sweet, of hay. My aunt bangs on the door.

"Ilonka, come out!"

Dunja thinks of how this is the first time that she's standing in front of their door. Ilonka and Karlo come out of the wardrobe. She opens the door, holding him by the hand. He is trying to break away, he is big and powerful. She can barely control him. More and more women and children are arriving in the yard. They are fleeing through Ilonka's corn stubble field, towards the tracks, fields and the Bosna. The stalks break up under the force of their bodies. Ilonka straggles behind with Karlo. He struggled and kicked like Began did in the pond, whenever we left the village. She shouts at him that he will get us all killed. But he howls louder.

The railway stone comes loose under their feet. The tracks always smell the same. Melted tar, hot metal, old wood. A bullet whistles by Dunja's head, singeing her hair. A whole lock is left in her hand. They go down off the track into a field, and run towards the Bosna. Dunja no

longer hears Karlo's howling. Nor the drumming of bullets, nor her mother's voice. Only the river's roar.

Dunja takes her shoes off on the riverbank. She steps in, and the water flows over her ankles. It's as cold in summer as it is in autumn. It's getting deeper, already up to her waist. My aunt holds her by the hand. The river is fast, and can easily seize a light child's body into its current.

Under their feet are rocks, mud and slippery river grass. Fat carp swim around them, overfed on plastic and the flesh of bodies.

SILENCE

Fog falls on the village across the Bosna. The women and children are gathered in front of a house with a weeping willow. They are silent, and looking towards the forest, which is burning. Their wet feet are scratched and dirty. Dunja is sitting in the grass next to Beka, caressing him. Were everything not covered by the dark, it would be seen that her face is no longer green, but white, and her mouth shrunken, like she had just now eaten an unripe apple.

Above all, they are hearing Grandma's howls. She is hurrying down the narrow highway, rolling like a black woollen ball. From which her arms are sticking out, like two knitting needles. They sit her down on the concrete steps in front of the house. My aunt brings water and sugar. Grandma breathes rattlingly, her dry throat, like the dust, doesn't take in water.

My father and brother arrive at the gate.

Their silence is louder than Grandma's rattle.

NIGHT

Don't hesitate. Please, come in ...

The house with the weeping willow isn't locked.

And who would it be locked against? Against thieves and bandits?

Follow me, just be careful you don't trip in the dark on one of the unmoving bodies. They are everywhere, on the couches, beds, floor. There's not enough space for everyone. If you could see them, you would be terrified by their eyes. They are wide open. Stuck fast. And it wouldn't even help if you were to pull their eyelashes. They would suffocate if their mouths were not thrown open. Warm steam billows from them, and silenced howls. In their throats, tears welled up for just a moment, and so the steam stops; they clear their throats, and then cry harder, as if through a cleaned-out stovepipe. It's suffocating in the house. Why doesn't anybody open the windows?

At the bathroom door, the blurred thick glass gleams yellow.

The plashing of water can be heard.

My brother has locked himself in there. For a long time, he stands in the tub, his face turned towards the mirror. From the crackling flame of the oil lamp, his figure is dark, his shadow jumping. In the mirror, he doesn't see the colours on his own skin, but he feels them under his fingers. For hardened blood is amassed on his skin, like a fresh scar. It dissolves away under the cold water. Down his body drips a mixture of our bloods, which disappear down into the rusted hole in the tub. It smells of the barren earth around the mineral springs.

In the dark, he doesn't see that he hasn't washed the blood off himself, and that it has penetrated into the scratches on his white skin. The towel he wipes himself off with, he throws onto the ground, and stands on. The clothes he puts on are someone else's, too big. My brother is shrunken in them.

Next to the tub, in a plastic wash basin, are my brother's tracksuit and trainers. In the morning, our aunt will burn them there, behind the house, where they burn trash. It will stink of plastic and rotten flesh.

Although the well water has chilled his skin, heat still courses under it. His heart thunders, like that of a child staring into a river's muddy whirlpool, like the eyes of a new-born mouse uprooted from a house. He lies on the couch in the kitchen. Staring into the dark around himself. It seems to him that some creature big as a rabbit is wriggling out of him, and that he is hearing the patter of its little legs on the linoleum. He doesn't know where he might turn. The house is getting smaller, not a single window can be opened. He would shout, but his mouth is full of earth. His eyes are full of it. He can hear how the shovels thrust into the mass of loose earth, and how it is scattered into dust. I am lying next to my brother, squeezing his hand.

We hear our mother as she speaks.

“Think of something beautiful, it will be easier for you to fall asleep.”

We are thinking of the sea. There is nothing more beautiful in the world than the sea. The air is salty, and smells of pine.

We are being driven, with our father, in a truck. Our mother is not going with us. “I don’t know how to swim anyway.”

The torn-up seats bounce and squeak. It’s hot and dusty. We are throwing up on the black nylon.

“Just a little further,” says our father. “A little further, just.”

The salty air is chirring. Coconut custard, pink ice cream. There’s no end to the blueness.

We float, and we forget.

“Think of something beautiful,” whispers our mother.

THE LAST PHOTOGRAPH

I'll show you the yard. Look, Grandpa's already there. He's coming up out from the cellar, shirt unbuttoned and sleeves rolled up. He's stopped next to the fountain, taking off his shirt, and hooking it on the nail where he hangs his wet towel. The sun is burning just as much today, and so nothing will slip by us; only Grandpa's face is grown dark, as if a shadow has fallen on him from his eyebrows, thick and cold as a forest's. From the shed, he takes out the wheelbarrow, and puts the shovel onto it. He pivots around himself, because he doesn't know where to begin. The yard is a dry naked body, bruised and bloody. The dusty road a hot, dark red mash. The mix for blood sausage. In winter, Grandpa lures the pig with wild apples, but she knows, squeals and braces her feet. Grandpa first of all pats her and babbles to her, but when his deception doesn't succeed, all the gods and saints spill out of his mouth. He ties her with cord and brings her out, and hits her there with a hammer, in the middle of the forehead. The pig, then, is able only to quietly moan, like Grandma at the well. Grandpa then thrusts a knife into her neck, and Grandma puts down a sooty baking dish to collect the blood. In a pot with boiling water are the head and slippery entrails. Later on, Grandma squeezes everything into a big grinding machine. She pours the blood into the mash, and fills the washed-out casings.

“Eat, eat ... they spoil quickly.”

Grandpa loads the coagulated blood from the road onto the wheelbarrow, mixed with dust and pebbles. There is already a pile on the wheelbarrow, but it seems to Grandpa that he hasn't even begun. He is wet from the strain and the heat. It's as if his head will burst. And he has disturbed the swarms of blowflies, which now buzz around him and stick to the drips of sweat on his body. Grandpa looks up towards the sky, and roars like an animal. He throws the shovel down by the road and drives the wheelbarrow away to the pond, to unload it in a hole. There, where everything which dies is thrown.

Put a clean cloth over your nose. Breathe with your mouth.

Although it dawned long ago, I am in complete darkness. The improvised mortuary has no windows; it once served as a garage. The shelves with the tools have been taken down from its walls. Everywhere, bare cement. Nylon is spread on the floor. We are lined in three rows. I am lying in the second one, somewhere in the middle, wrapped in rustling foil. On the inner side it's silvery, on the outside gold. Like the smooth fabric of the quilt in my great-grandmother's room, or a golden can with a wormy piece of meat. This is my formal dress. The glittering of the foil in the dark brings to mind the tiny little bonfires on that hot night when we came to the village across the Bosna.

The garage door is metal, and opens upwards. Like the bed in my mother's room. The light eats up all the pitch darkness, but the smell of stale death stays motionless. The photographer coughs, and puts

his sleeve over his nose. The foil rustles. This uncovers my bluish face and gaunt body. Under the slightly raised eyelids, the blue eyes are still as Julia's. The mouth has stayed open. Like in my photograph on the roof of the red Lada. Under the nose, a thick stream of red blood has hardened. The hair is still beautiful, white, brightened by the camomile flowers. Above my head is a crown of purple, twisted fingers.

The photographer approaches, and wipes off the mix of sweat and tears with his sleeve. He captures me through the lens, and focuses. With one click he takes my last photograph. The difference with the photograph from my father's polaroid being that this one is clear, with all the details. In front of the garage stand my father and brother. Waiting for the photographer to come out. It's not possible to speak with tightened throats. Their eyes have dried.

Grandpa takes the cover off the well and puts it down onto the grass. He doesn't see his own shadow on the surface; the water is just as dark. Inside are muffled silence and motionlessness. He throws in the bucket. Stone, water, metal. He pours the water into the bigger bucket from the barn, and waters the concrete in front of our house. The water is turned rosy by the blood of the black-headband soldier, and pours down into the dried-out grass, there where the upturned pot is lying amid the remnants of tomato sauce. The blowflies don't go away from Grandpa; he waves in vain with his bear-paw in front of his face.

The door to our house is left open the whole night.

Be careful not to step on the glass, the windows are blown-out into pieces.

The sheet has slipped from the wooden steps. The creak is no longer to be heard. A few more steps and we are upstairs, into the empty space congested with concrete dust. If you lower yourself onto the floor, look carefully, you'll be able to see the prints of bare feet in the dust, and big prints from the black boot.

If I blow, they will disappear.

And there are my slippers, below the window.

Don't say anything, here the quietest sounds turn into echoes.

From the big window, the forest and highway can be seen, and the big clothes line in the meadow above the house. It's still smoking from the black gaps in the forest, the highway's still empty, and the spring curtain on the clothes line is turned into torn, blackened rags. A wedding veil could not be made from them.

In the house the silence of the well would reign, were it not for the pigeons cooing under the roof.

Now we descend, down to the threshold. There Sivka is sitting, with a red muzzle.

She's eaten up the trampled aster flowers in front of Grandma's house.

FUNERAL

Although the road is scraped to the bone, and the concrete washed out, the air still smells of iron. The fattened blowflies spread it, their bodies swollen to the point of bursting. They collide in the air, landing on the rose-coloured puddles and rotten plums in the grass.

My brother kneels next to the road, and tears the yellow marigolds from our flower garden. The hard stalks leave a powerful green smell on his hands. Dry earth lingers a long time under his broken nails. He hasn't managed to wash it out. The bouquet of marigold is a blazing sun. Under his t-shirt his skin is scratched, like white doodled paper. It's unseen, but it's soaked in others' blood, the skin being like white cotton which absorbs everything you spill on it. He stands alone in the middle of the road. In his pupils are the charred remnants, and weak curls of smoke.

He doesn't sniff the sun in his hands.

Warm clouds of fog are coming out of my father's mouth. He is sitting in the shade, on the steps before the wide-open front doors. He is looking at how the concrete is drying, and how heat is evaporating from it. Sweat drips from his bald head. Colder than fear. Butt ends crushed by the ribbed sole.

My father too is wearing firmly tightened, black boots.

Grandpa is standing with his back turned to my father. In the concrete trough is a bucket with water. He seizes the water with his hands and pours it behind his neck, on his back, under the armpits. The water pours down over his skin and is soaked into his camouflage trousers. It seems that Grandpa doesn't notice this. He washes himself and runs his wet hands through his thick hair. He wipes himself off with his own stiffened towel. He doesn't sense the smell, he's as used to it as his own bear-paw. He puts on his shirt and buttons up.

They say nothing. They pass by the silvery-blue spruces, barbed wire and roses, whose thorny stalks remain, then between the two big pines, and turn left towards Spasoje's house. Towards the springs and the graveyard. They are walking slowly along the side of the meandering highway. One behind the other. My brother goes first, the sun in his hands looking towards the earth.

The houses are silent. The yards here and there are open, rubber slippers and moccasins scattered in front of the doors. White plastic buckets and baskets full of half-rotten fruit. The gate into the Spasoje's yard is closed. He spent yesterday afternoon and last night in the hay loft. He came out at dawn, when everything had quietened down. He's standing in the yard, looking at the highway. They nod their heads in the sign of greeting. Spasoje takes off his fur cap and stops by the yard gate. He watches as they disappear round the bend. He crosses himself.

The elder flowers down by the hay loft are turned into black juicy berries.

The graveyard is on a hillock. From the forest, it can be seen as if on your palm. And so, they dug out a tomb at the foot of the graveyard, in the shade of the tall oak trees. The sun never touches there. Soldiers dug it out. With picks. There is no difference between digging a trench and digging a grave. Their boots are muddy, because the earth there is moist. Water pours in from everywhere.

They've brought me in an old white van. Thick cordage tightened round the hard wooden coffin. They carry me on their shoulders. Grandpa, uncle, father and brother. My uncle came in the van with the driver. The coffin is light, but all the weight of the serene sky is fallen down on their wide shoulders.

The priest's arms are outstretched. White wings. His skin soft and clean, smelling of soap. On both sides of him, tired legs are standing. Tottering knees and muddy boots. The priest's voice is uniform and soft. The coffin drops into the muddy quagmire. The sound is unsettling. Like the blow of a hammer on the head of a nail. The muddy cordage is drawn out and rolled up like a snake's litter. The lumps of earth are cold in the hand. Such was the cold of Grandma's lilac bush. The lumps thud on the coffin cover. Dirty fingers rub against the fabric of dresses. The men's weeping is mute.

Under the cross with my name, my brother puts down the sun. Onto the earth, yellow wax drips from my mother's ship-shaped candle.

HOSPITAL

Almond candies rustle in Dunja's pocket. They're wrapped in transparent cellophane. They came from Caritas, in a packet along with rice, sugar, cans, soaps and tooth-brushes. They got it in the town of B. There, my mother is lying in the hospital. My father and brother are visiting her.

They stop by the doors of room number 7. The beds are crammed, one against the other. The bodies motionless, like on the nylon in the garage. They are covered in white paper. White and soft, like hand towels. Iron rods are sticking out from my mother's legs. She is raised up high. They see the black skin and green nails. The smell of a butcher's. Of a morgue. It's hot. Humidity in the open window.

They hesitate at the doors. My mother silently watches them. They approach slowly. My brother seems thinner and younger to her. So diminished that she'd be able to pick him up in her arms. My father takes her by her sweaty hand.

“Did you bury her?”

They nod. Her body starts shaking. Tears pour down from the sides. Her hair, turned grey, soaks them up.

Dunja's delighted by the sugar and almonds. She goes down the highway towards the river bank. There is even more trash there. How can the world still be the same? She is surprised by the faces at the doors in the twilight. By the birds above the fields. Only the sky has changed. At its edges, above the forest, clouds have amassed. Like the foam on the sides of the bucket with the just-milked milk. The days have shortened. The sky greys quickly, and lowers over the Bosna. She sits down on the cold gravel. The Bosna flows quickly when you approach. Dunja always hears its murmur. A bicycle turns on the bank, brakes suddenly. The gravel scrapes. Crni throws down his bike, and sits down next to Dunja.

“Were you there too? Did they really kill her?”

He speaks quietly, but in Dunja's ears, his voice echoes.

She starts crying. Crni falls silent and looks into the river. Dunja pulls a sweet out of her pocket, and puts it into his hand. Gravel sounds under their feet. The highway is long. He can hear the blood gushing through her veins, the beats of her heart.

She calms down under the weeping willow. In the dark.

LITTLE FINGER BABY

Dunja and my uncle stop in the hospital corridor, in front of the white, peeling doors. It stinks of bleach, like in the school toilets. In the hospitals and in the schools, in the WCs, the squat toilets have rusted. The toilet cisterns are installed high-up, you need to stand up on your toes to reach the black cord and release the water. Afterwards, the toilet cisterns gurgle for a long time. On the doors are two narrow glass panes. Through these, Dunja watches the unhurried female bodies. Their backs are bowed, their faces grey. Their hands hold their deflated bellies, and between their legs they squeeze big pieces of cotton wool soaked in black blood. The cotton wool is not able to absorb the clots; so they stick to the surface. They are dark and smooth like chicken liver. In the WCs, the women stand over the squat toilets, because they've just been stitched between the legs.

Dunja doesn't recognise her mother. Her hair is smeared, her mouth inflamed. No green crayon round her eyes. They are red from weeping. Her nightgown is short and wide, with big necklines at the front and back. She sees her small white breasts, with black swollen nipples. Her stomach is skinny, thick black hair underneath. Her mother is completely different. At the sight of such a mother, her palms sweat, and her body convulses and shrinks.

Where will she escape to from her mother?

Hospital sounds cut through the air. The echoes of women's voices and the weeping of new-borns mix with the clipping of scissors and metal utensils. Dunja clenches her sweaty fists out of fear.

When babies are born as little fingers, they are not buried. They gush out of the womb together with blood. Like when the membrane bursts on a tomato, and so juice spills out, filled up with seeds. The juice from the womb ends up in white metal vessels. It's all thrown away, but nobody knows where to. Those vessels are cold as scissors.

My aunt's stomach didn't get to grow.

The baby was a little finger.

TRAINERS

Summer's end.

You can tell by the smell of the motionless, moist air. It seems that the plants in the gardens are completely dried out by the powerful sun, and that in the blackened fruits there is nothing, only dust. But still, if you grab a stalk and split it, you will see that inside it's still wet, and that there's moist blackness inside the fruits. It will drip out down your fingers like ink.

At the same time, you dry and rot.

The clouds too, they are grey and faraway, but they travel fast. By the time they overhang us, they will be totally black. From them, heavy, cold rain will fall, and the land will swallow up all the rot.

Dunja, from the window of her room in the house with the weeping willow, observes the successively-arriving clouds. They look unstoppable and violent. Out of the blue, the wind starts blowing, and lifts up the white little hairs on her arms. She looks across the Bosna, at the village and forest. She can hear how the yellowed bullrush rustles at the pond, and how its snowflakes are scattered by the wind, gentle as dandelions. The tree frogs croak all the louder; they have a presentiment of the storm.

She is still wearing shorts and undershirt, although it has freshened up. She goes down the stairs, and instead of slippers, puts on her old black shoes, the ones which she carried in her hands while wading across the Bosna this summer. They are still beautiful, straps at the side, the leather preserved, except for a small hole in the place of the big toe on the left shoe. Her shoes are small though, so she keeps her toes bent. She hears her mother, as she bangs pots in the kitchen, and creaks with her rubber slippers on the linoleum. They have stayed alone in the house with the weeping willow, the others of the family have already returned to our village. My aunt is still afraid, she will stay till winter. Ever since she got out of hospital, she is much thinner, no longer has anywhere to shift her skirt buttons to. Grandma bakes her bread, and brings butter and milk for breakfast. But she eats less than Dunja. My uncle sometimes drops by at night. Dunja steps out of the house, but doesn't tell her where she is going. Outside lies Beka, tied to a pole. She kneels and kisses him between his little horns. She goes down the highway, hurrying.

My father and Grandma have stayed in the house of uprooted eyes. They sent my brother to our mother. They transferred her to Z. Our mother's friends who live there will look after him. My father is sitting at the table, smoking. Grandma is by the oven. Fat is sizzling in the pan. Grandma will dribble it on the pita in the dish. All the doors in the house are open, but no fresh air reaches the inside. The smell is always the same. Moisture and rotten wood. The kitchen fumes cling to the walls and sticky curtains. Grandma is sweating. It trickles on her cheeks. She tightens the knot on her kerchief. She sits down at the table. Her body spills over the bench.

Sivka's teeth are red. She stands on the threshold and meows. A throttled mouse in front of her.

Grandma gets up, and brandishes a broom. She sweeps the mouse into the dustpan, and throws it into the grass in front of the house. It lies on the grass, with open eyes. A few big rain drops land on the blue boards over the veranda. Grandma watches Dunja as she runs to meet her.

She takes off her shoes in the hallway. Her feet are cold and bare. The dust from the dirty floor sticks to her feet. My trainers are still there, leaned against the wall. Nobody touches them. Flies have been dotting them with black. A gossamer spider web covers them. Dunja, in the kitchen, quietly greets the two of them. Grandma stays in the corridor, and leans the soles of her shoes alongside the soles of my trainers.

There's no tablecloth on the table. The baking dish stands in the middle. On the plates, there are traces of dried-out little drops of water, and greasy fingers. They cut the pita, and take the pieces by hand out of the dish, and set them on the plates.

Dunja feels nausea. From the smell of the house and the fat in the pita.

“Eat something, look how thin you are. Your legs will snap!”

Grandma swallows a big piece of pita.

“She saw her shoes.”

Dunja's throat tightens. A mouthful sticks.

Tears drop onto her plate.

“Let her take the trainers,” says my father.

“We're eating now, so we won't cry.”

The bags rustle in the hallway. Dunja stops on the veranda. The rain is hitting harder.

Grandma throws the trainers into a nylon bag. From one of them a little mouse wriggles out. It scratches in panic at the bag. Dunja bursts into tears, and runs out onto the road. Rain and cold wind hit her face. Grandma stays standing on the veranda, with the bag in her hands. She watches Dunja's swaying hair, until she disappears behind the hedge.

BEKAN

The lambskin now is spread next to Dunja's bed. When she gets up in the morning, she stands with bare feet on its intricate, curly hair. She tried to comb it out, but the comb's teeth broke on the hard knots. It has greyed from dust and rot. Grandpa had it nailed down over the faucet, to the wooden door of the corn crib. He had the inner side turned towards the sun, and so it hardened and coarsened like those fox skins which, bent around female necks, bite their own tails. Grandpa rubbed ash into the skin, his bear-paw turned completely grey. After this he sprinkled the skin with coarse salt. So blowflies flee it.

Bekan had got loose from the pole, and ran out through the open gate and onto the highway. The car which hit him didn't stop, and within a minute was disappeared round the bend in a yellow cloud of dust and smoke. So Bekan lies next to the road, next to the canal, with broken legs. He quietly bleats. Around his neck, the rope still hangs.

My uncle cuts his throat. Dunja cannot watch. She flees to the room in the attic, and closes the window. She is lying on the bed, out of breath. Like when you fall on your back on ice, and cannot breathe. My uncle hangs Bekan on hooks by his rear legs, and strips off his skin. His pelt stayed clean; it's only under the neck that it's a little caked with blood. The knife cuts into the stomach, slices him open. The entrails fall out into a plastic bucket. Without his fur, Bekan is thin and lucid. Like Dunja. His flesh is blue.

Dunja's whole body is shaking. The pillowcase is totally wet. She doesn't come down from the attic till dusk. She opens the window. In the yard, there's no one. Only the big hooks and the buckets. Everything has been splashed over with well water. Cold wind hits her in the face. She closes her eyes.

The house with the weeping willow smells of meat. My aunt is roasting him in the big cooking dish. The bread soaked in the grease is soft. It doesn't smell of yeast. And Dunja eats.