

Floating Bridges

Translation by Lyn Marven

There is no scream, no gurgling. Just a gingham picnic blanket. And two children in my arms. I am silent. But not calm. Grey sky above us, grass below. I can feel the colour draining from my skin, it is turning waxen, cold. The children don't make a sound. Theo, eighteen months old, is virtually motionless. Hannes, who turned seven a month ago, has stopped asking me questions. I am sitting on the gingham picnic blanket, two children in my arms, staring at the lake. It's the middle of summer and tree pollen is tumbling like snowflakes from the sky. As white as snow, as red as the cheeks of the children running around, as black as the crows in the trees. No mirror, not a single soul speaks to me. My eyes turn to the drink in my lap. I remember that it is important to drink. I offer the children their apple juice spritzer. They don't want any. Clumsily I unscrew the plastic bottle and take a sip. The bubbles of carbon dioxide burst on my gums, the mixture of apple juice and water tastes sweet-sour. My taste buds pick out the sourness above the rest.

On the first anniversary of the day that you were buried we go to a livestock show in Ireland. I don't tell the children what day it is. I don't want to think about it, and I don't want them to remember their father being committed to the earth. We walk across a large and incredibly green meadow surrounded by pastures with a few gates marked out. Huge tractors, wellies weather. A small boy is standing behind a donkey. Which kicks out. The child is flung to the ground. He cries. Turkeys strut around. They look like they have been assembled by a mad puppet-maker. With their ugly dangling folds of skin under their beaks, the extravagantly bushy feathers under the bald stubbly neck. Suddenly I notice I have goosebumps. Have you just made the hairs on my forearm stand on end? What are you now? A ghost? A memory? Are you rushing through the veins of your children, through their thoughts? Are you ascending like smoke to the heavens? Where are you? Are you in the gentle eyes of the cows, in the donkey's hoof? Are you a pony out on the moors? Small, shaggy and unyielding? Or are you over there at the back sitting side saddle on the tall steed, looking at me through the mourning crêpe under your top hat? Are you contemplating me through the eyes of this Irish horsewoman, asking yourself what has become of me?

To this day I keep wondering why you had to die. I know it was an accident, but still I search for connections, for a thread which leads me on, which reveals the beginning and the end and at the same time lets me escape from the monster, so that the labyrinth of our story, this maze of stone, does not become my destiny. I look for the thread which will save me, which I unravel on the way to the bull's face. A ball of thread that shrinks in my hand and does not get tangled. I am searching for the monster, I want to look it in the eyes. So I claim. Am I the one spinning the thread or am I actually the beast in the end? What distinguishes Ariadne from the Minotaur? What separates Orpheus and Eurydice? In ancient myth the roles seem fixed, whereas my – your – our roles are floating bridges, drifting free on the water. Our entire existence rests on a fiction. On connections, joints which we build to make sense where there is none. We want to hold each other up, support each other, and yet we kept kicking each other's legs away from under our bodies. Falling in love, forgiving, losing. The point of view jumps. From me to you. Everything depends on where you stand. I am here. You are there. I don't know where that place is. But I know, I keep explaining to myself, that your body is now lying under a pile of earth, and I hate this mound. I hate the thought that you are decomposing. That your skin is decaying, your flesh is dissolving, your bones are disintegrating. I know you are not down there. You are here. You are standing in front of the mosaic on the wall of the bookstore. I spy you from the library. Just like I saw you the first time. I imagined you with three children, without having exchanged a single word with you. I drew a picture of you in my mind. Long before I spoke to you. Because I was the one looking at you. You didn't even glance at me. And all I dared to do was step forwards briefly, I stood wordlessly in front of you, asked you for a light and with the flame in my hand I slunk back behind the glass of the window niche. In the reading nook I scribbled a few spiky words on my notepad. When I looked up you were gone. I don't smoke. The water in the flat, light blue pond in front of the library glitters. Someone has thrown a coin in. It doesn't land head side up.

How ordinary this Sunday in June is, how peaceful, how indestructible, verging on boring. The sun is not visible, the sky is milky, overcast. Tree pollen tumbles down from above, like snowflakes. First white, then red, then black. In the morning, as I am stumbling sleepily towards the bathroom block with my toothbrush in hand, I go past the group of parents who set up camp by the crossing with their primary-aged children yesterday. A rangy man with a full beard is there handing round coffee at the trestle tables. I recognise him. I have seen this actor in various roles in the cinema and on television. Giddy as a teenager I return to our

caravan and convey how keen I am to confuse the person with the role. I wind you up by waxing lyrical. You grin good-naturedly and say, ‘I have faith in your cowardice’. Do you really say that? That’s what I heard at any rate. Your brother narrows his eyes sceptically. Maybe the sun is just too bright for him. The two of you talked until late in the night and have only just got up. I try to provoke you further by asserting how impressive, how amazingly strong and well-proportioned the former professional swimmer’s torso was. When my words get no reaction, I demonstratively snatch up our younger son and announce that I’m just off to swan around on the bathing jetty, in order to bewitch the actor with the aid of Theo. You smile indulgently and don’t stop me. It’s just before midday. Some families are still sitting over breakfast; the ones with small children are already preparing lunch. The tents, caravans and mobile homes are all sitting in the middle of a light-filled pine forest on the banks of the lake whose water is so clear, so fresh, so inviting. Even on this rather cool day I feel like diving in. On the jetty our son is walking ahead of me on his little legs. He makes a beeline for the grinning actor and his wife. The pair are in a close embrace. I keep my eyes on all three of them. Our son wobbles, bow-legged, like a sailor on land. Maybe it’s his unsteadiness or maybe it’s just uneven planks on the jetty but suddenly Theo stumbles. Instinctively my arm shoots out and yanks the child back just before he reaches the edge. ‘Good reflexes’, the actor praises me, and this brief remark is enough for me to realise that he is a human being and not a story. Nevertheless, I proudly tell you about this compliment shortly afterwards. ‘Don’t be like that. You know why. You are always *prepared*. And I – I am *separating* myself now. Please stop.’ That’s how the woman who becomes his lover speaks to the actor in one of his films, so snippily and terse, and in this scene he simply shoots her an irritated glance from behind the steering wheel of a Trabant. In this role he loves the woman despite her abrasive manner. And yet, so I seem to recall, he later helps her to flee to the West. Thus he not only lets his lover go, he even sends her off on that uncertain journey. That moved me to tears. ‘Good reflexes’, I repeat proudly, when I reach our caravan. I embellish the scene somewhat, I have Theo flying through the air, almost skimming the water. ‘Good reflexes! Not everyone has them!’ The furrows on your brother’s forehead deepen as I whip myself up into paroxysms of enthusiasm for the stranger on the jetty whom I claim to have recognised as the hero of the film. The way I paint Theo tripping it’s almost as if I had sacrificed our child to my desire. I am playing with fire. You simply smile serenely and don’t rise to my bait. Jealousy is not one of your weaknesses. It is Sunday. The whole day lies before us, a lifetime. The evening before we had dinner with your family. We have invited your parents to stay in a guesthouse nearby for a few nights. Your brother is camping in a tent

outside our caravan. After breakfast our elder son wants to go out on the lake with you. He begs and pleads. You say, 'wait until we get back'. Our son tries to change your mind. But you want to go sailing with your brother first. The sky looks a bit grey. There is a slight wind on the shore. The trees rustle.

You are tired, you want to come home now, you've had enough of slaving away at a distance, you said to me on the telephone a week before your death. You were working in a different city. I took a sharp intake of breath and didn't say 'pull yourself together'. But that was probably the message that my voice conveyed when I decided to break off the conversation at that point. At that moment I thought I was tired too, infinitely exhausted. But since then I have found out the real meaning of exhaustion. When you're afraid that you will collapse when you take the next step. Because blackness fills your eyes like crude oil, and your face is a pointed hare's mask. With big ears, which hear everything that is unsaid. The world is full of signs since you are no longer in it. The bus driver's fierce expression, what sounds like sharpness in her voice in the announcement she makes which is directed only at me: 'Please move down the bus. Come on! There is space at the back.' I can't move. I am stuck fast. I throw myself against a wall of people and bounce off this down-lined wall, smelling of sweat and gritting salt. A while ago, as I was dusting, I knocked over your baptismal candle which was standing next to the books on the shelves. It broke in two. Now there are jagged edges sticking up at both ends. It was impossible to stick back together. Heating up the wax didn't work at any rate. You were still alive when that happened. I hid the break from you. When you died, I threw the remains of the candle away. Now I believe it was a premonition. The candle stood for your life. It broke. Everything pieced together and formed your fate. I violated some unwritten laws and in doing so I summoned your death. Suddenly my superstitious beliefs are stronger than my rational mind. And your actual demise haunts my days. The water of the lake rushes and glugs in my ears. So tangible, so closely linked to everything I see, feel, think, that I don't even notice that every moment of mine is a double exposure. I don't see the shadow because it's always there. I only notice it when it is extinguished. More than two years have already passed by then. Maybe the fact that you didn't really make a big fuss over your birthday was also a sign, it was two weeks before your death and you just commandeered a garden party with us. You who were never short of an excuse for an elaborate party. You didn't even celebrate your last birthday. Had you given up already? Did you know already? I slap myself on the cheeks in frustration. Stupid magical thinking. Then I remember the pigeon, the improbable pigeon. It had strangled itself to death

in the fork of a branch. I didn't see it myself, but you swore it was true. It had apparently been there the whole time during my last pregnancy. Its decomposing corpse hung from the branch, right in front of our balcony, a few metres away from our railings, in the crown of the tree. Every day I leant against those railings while my belly grew and grew, and I felt the child inside more every day. It was a calm, strong child. It only kicked occasionally, but when it did, it kicked hard. I was looking forward to meeting this child. I talked to it while I checked the weather. As I did, I would hold out the palm of my hand in the direction of the pigeon, to test for any precipitation. I didn't notice the corpse. Yet there it was, draped in front of me, up in the lofty heights, like victims of hanging in the middle ages. But all I saw was the sky: long bands of clouds stretching out, behind them the firmament. First grey, then blue and finally white. The station and the trainline in the distance, the smoke from the chimneys, the cranes and high rise blocks. I looked straight ahead. I didn't notice the dead pigeon. You had spotted it there ages ago. Every day you were afraid that I would see it. You watched silently as I went out onto the balcony, sticking my nose in the air to tank up on fresh air and sunshine. I wanted some peace and quiet. But suddenly you began to sweep, you practically swept me off the balcony. Annoyed, I retreated back into the apartment. I had no idea what made you reach for the broom. Involuntarily I blocked out the dead pigeon. My eyes were focused too far in the distance. Even though I had failed to notice the corpse for so many weeks now, you feared that at some point I would stop letting the bare branches of the tree blur out of focus. You thought that the dead pigeon would upset me and that my agitation would harm the unborn child. You wanted to spare me the sight. In secret you threw a stone at the cadaver, trying to dislodge it so that the corpse would fall to the ground finally. Instead the stone fell the eight storeys down to the asphalt path in front of our building. It didn't occur to you that someone might have been walking under our balcony at that very moment. One of the many white-curling neighbours pulling her shopping trolley to the shops. Her 'granny wheels', you would have called the trolley in your usual vernacular. You had adopted the so-called Berliner Schnauze: these irreverent sayings were your way of acting the part as humorous, indestructible – this was your starring role. But there was no-one with you on the balcony when you threw the stone. You missed the pigeon. The stone smashed against the asphalt, its fall unbroken. Miraculously, it didn't injure anyone. The animal's cadaver continued to dangle from the branch. The pigeon's neck got longer and longer, its feathers more ruffled, its body in tatters. At some point it vanished suddenly. Maybe it was a gust of wind, perhaps a storm, or maybe it was just the result of the decay. Its body disintegrated, disappeared, turned to dust. Most likely what was left of the pigeon plummeted into the

depths. I assume the caretaker swept its remains away and threw them in the bin. The child in my belly came into the world. The nurses wheeled it to the intensive care station immediately. I was instructed to do what was necessary after the exertions of birth, which I found impossible. Sleep. Rest. Recuperate. Gather my strength to bed in with this bundle of a human once the wires and tubes were removed. The newborn and I celebrated Christmas in hospital. His hospital cot stood next to my bed. Behind its bars he slumbered peacefully and I studied his face. I tried to memorise his features. It was a quiet celebration with two promotional gifts from the hospital, a cherry stone cushion and a yellow sleeping bag. By New Year's Eve we were back home again. When you die, our younger son Theo is just eighteen months old. He thinks he is invincible. He laughs when he opens his eyes. He cries when he doesn't get what he wants. From one moment to the next he bursts into tears. His brother and I stare at him in confusion. We have never known crying like this. How is it possible? Tears spurt from the corners of his eyes. I wipe them away and take him in my arms. Still perplexed by his outburst. He flings himself at me, calms down, turns his gaze outwards again. He is two years old when he asks me why the young woman at the next table is sad. All I had noticed was that there was a cheerful birthday gathering happening. I didn't pay any further attention to the table next to us. I'm too busy trying to keep the halting conversation between your parents and Hannes going. Your parents had driven to Berlin by themselves to see us, but when they got to the outskirts of the city they realised that they couldn't find our address and that your father's wallet had also disappeared. He probably left it lying at a service station. The lapses in memory had already been apparent long before your death. But your death left your parents' memories riddled with holes. Some information disappeared in there and never resurfaced. 'Why is the woman sad?' Theo asked me again, and I finally looked round. At first glance all I see are happy people celebrating, but then I notice that one young woman is just feigning cheerfulness. 'What's up with her?', Theo won't let it lie. I reply, 'I don't know'. The children's grandfather wants to treat us. He pulls out his card, but then can't remember the PIN. Small-talk doesn't help to cover up the embarrassment any more. Hannes has to tell them for the fifth time which school year he is in. 'Oma, you just asked me that already', he remarks. She smiles and Hannes is the one who looks confused. Confused and disbelieving. Are they trying to wind him up? Or is he so insignificant that they immediately forget what he tells them? Hannes doesn't want to offend his grandparents, but he doesn't understand that their consciousness is taking a different path, one that he cannot follow. Theo in my arms is also as sensitive as a seismograph. Our sons are extraordinary. And precisely because of that, a question keeps knocking at the back of my

head after your death: was this second boy, was this wager with fate, a step too far? Quid pro quo. This idée fixe that perhaps we had both asked too much of an instance that no-one knows. Give one life, take another. My glasses are scratched. The light doesn't refract at the right points any more. Suddenly there are smears, shadows, spirits. Quid pro quo. You lie next to me in bed. Your full lips, this carpet of hair, your droopy eyelids. I stroke the delicate skin of a seven-year-old.

This Sunday in June is rather cool, not very summery. The sun is not visible, the sky whiteish grey. Tree pollen tumbles down like snowflakes. Hardly anyone is jumping off the jetty into the dark water of the lake. I am lying on a gingham picnic blanket, nursing our younger son. The meadow by the side of the lake is practically empty. I prop myself up on one side while I look out at the lake. I watch as you lower the skiff into the water with your brother. You got the boat for your birthday last year. You bought it second hand from a man in Oderbruch. You went to pick it up with Hannes and the two of you assembled it together. It is actually a rowing boat, a GDR-made collapsible boat to be precise, a Delphin, but with an additional mast construction. You step into the skiff, you set the sail and you are gone. Without saying goodbye. The wind catches the sail. Your brother and you fly across the lake in the boat and quickly disappear over the horizon. I am lying on the shore on the picnic blanket with the baby, nursing him. He sucks and sucks. I prop myself up on my elbow to look out over the water. I can't make out the boat any more. The sail has vanished. I hold the child so he can suckle better. Hoping it will make him fall asleep.

I don't cry enough. I can't cry. I know it would offer me some release but I don't want to be set free. I want the struggle. I hate crying in front of other people. You were always the one who was tearful, and more than once I felt blackmailed by your tears. I only cry when I am alone, and when I have the time. The children need to be elsewhere. There can't be any appointment, meeting, phone-call scheduled over the course of the next hour. When I've taken the children to school and kindergarten, when I know, now, early in the morning, I've got an hour to myself, then the tears flow, sometimes even as soon as I open the door to the apartment block. I stumble into the lift, at the top I feel blindly for the bike lock, steer myself carefully through the fire doors in the attic storey, past the graffiti, the spattered concrete, go down one flight of stairs and finally open the door to our apartment, sink onto the sofa and sob. I do it quietly, so that the neighbours don't hear me. When I cry it makes me so uncomfortable with myself that I immediately need to do something else, to distract me. So I

clean the apartment. I dust, and through the veil of tears I can hardly tell whether I am actually removing any dirt. I sniffle, my eyes, my nose, everything is running, swelling, closing over, everything is flooded with tears. Snivelling. I don't want to see myself or feel anything while I cry. I concentrate on the cloth in my hand. I press it hard against the shelves and polish the veneer. I haven't even done three rows of books by the time the crying stops. I stick my head under the tap, cool my eyelids. My mascara has run, painting panda eyes. I wipe them away with damp cotton wool. I am convinced that everyone will see that I have been crying. But no-one asks about the redness in my eyes or indicates in any other way that I look pitiful. That's probably just the role that I am expected to play now. Grief, despair, misery, pain. A few days after your death, when I still can't bring myself to believe it, I meet my oldest friend for lunch in the neighbourhood. He and I have known each other since the labour ward, so we joke sometimes, and it's only half joking. It's warm outside on that day, we sit out on the pavement, on the opposite side of the road is the district court. As we sit there, waiting for our Nepalese curry and enjoying the sunshine and the fresh air, lots of people stream past, presumably many of them are complainants and defendants, lawyers for the defence and prosecution, judges, court officials. But it's summer, everything is easy. Nobody should be battling it out in the courts, nobody should be grieving. That's how I feel for a moment. My friend tells a joke and I burst out laughing. It's a belly laugh, deep and loud. I shake with laughter, gasping for breath. At that very moment a neighbour walks by, someone who planted hundreds of tulips along the central verge of our road with you. He nods acknowledgement, his face is expressionless. There is no suspicion or reproach in the way he looks at me, but I immediately fall silent. The laughter sticks in my throat, dies away. I see myself through the eyes of this neighbour. The merry widow. Happy, not a care in the world, having lunch with another man, she is enjoying life even though your body has not even been found yet. To this day I don't know if that's what my neighbour was thinking. That's what I was thinking. Even in this state of shock I observe myself through the eyes of another, eye myself, my own gaze is harsher than any random passerby.

This Sunday in June is not very summery. The sky is greyish-white. You set off out on the lake with your brother. Out onto the green and deep water. I am not worried. It's a harmless bathing lake, not the sea or an ocean. You are both experienced sailors. You can swim. Whole bunches of children are splashing around here on their own or paddling far out onto the lake in rubber dinghies or on inflatables. Nobody on all the paddleboats or in all the canoes is wearing a life-vest. We only have one of them, for our seven-year-old. You set off in t-shirts.

You had even put on your white straw hat. On the shore a light breeze blows my hair over my forehead. A soft wind, I think, not a storm. I'm put out because I am the one looking after the children again and so I'm stuck on dry land. I can't even go swimming. Yet again I'll have been at the lake without even having touched the water. The little one, Theo, refuses to sleep. I lay him down on the gingham picnic blanket. Only a few minutes have passed since you set sail. Our elder son Hannes becomes unsettled. He runs onto the jetty, peering off into the distance, and then shouts, 'Mama! They have capsized!'. I take the little one in one arm, run over to him and see: nothing. Nobody sees anything. I ask Hannes what made him think that something might have happened. He says, 'the sail is gone'. Before us is the large, elongated lake with an island right in front of us, almost at the other side. 'Don't worry. Nothing has happened. The boat must have just disappeared behind the island,' I say. But Hannes doesn't calm down. Fretfully he runs from one end of the jetty to the other, keeping his eyes peeled for a silhouette on the horizon. He tries to spot the boat. The skiff is nowhere to be seen. After a while, other campers start to notice us too. The actor, his family and other parents come to join us on the jetty. 'It's nothing. What could have happened anyway?' The children and I peer at the water. I hold them both close. The body of the younger one pressed against me, firmly grasping the elder one's hand. Minutes elapse which feel like hours. In my head I run through all the possibilities, fast forward and rewind, get stuck at the end and loop back to the beginning.