

Stilton Literary Agency

Author: Brit Bildøen

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About the book:

"The Exile": A woman takes long walks along the beach with her dog. When she is not working banding birds at the Bird Station, she keeps mainly to herself.

"The State": A woman walks in a residential area pulling a wheeled suitcase behind her. Inside the suitcase is a dead cat.

"The Body": A woman goes out to her mailbox to get a letter she has long been waiting for. A letter with the power to change her life.

Three stories woven together: "The Exile", "The Body" and "The State". In "The Exile" we meet a woman who has isolated herself in a tiny place by the seaside. She would rather not think about the events in her life before she came to this place. But her defence mechanism is breaking down. In "The Body" we meet a woman who experiences the rejection of an approval for adoption of a child from China. A child she has been waiting for – for four long years. In "The State" we meet the same woman, but yet she is different. A woman who is slipping into madness and begins to stalk her case worker.

How far is she willing to go?

About the author:

Brit Bildøen (b. 1962) is one of Norway's most beloved and well acclaimed authors.

Bildøen made her literary debut in 1991 with a collection of poetry *Bilde av menn (Pictures of Men)*. In 1998 she had her literary breakthrough with the novel *Tvillingfeber (Twin Fever)*. For this she was nominated to the Brage Prize for best novel and awarded the Oslo prize and Nynorsk literary prize. For her third novel, *Landfastlykke (Landlocked)*, 2001, she was awarded the Melsom Prize and Sigmund Skard-scholarship. Both *Alt som er (All there is)*, 2004, and *Mitt milde vesen (My gentle self)*, 2006, have been praised by the critics. Her novel *Sju dager i august (Seven Days in August)* was longlisted for Dublin International Lit. Awards, has been widely praised in Norway and won the prestigious P2-lytternes Novel Prize in 2014.

Three Roads to the Sea

By Brit Bildøen

Sample Translation by Becky L. Crook

Guard your humanity.
—Sarah Bakewell, from *How to live or A life of Montaigne*

THE EXILE. THE BIRD STATION

The letters crackle. That is what they do. The stack of letters lying on the dresser stirs up a crackling tension in the house. Olov didn't say anything when he brought them, he just showed up with them and stomped inside without asking if it was a good time. Dear Olov. He stops by every now and then even though he knows I don't like visitors. He must also know I don't want to read letters that I wrote him years ago. I've been absolutely clear about that. I don't want to think about what has been. And yet, here is this stack of letters lying here. White, rectangular envelopes. Olov has tied a green silk ribbon around them. The bow is flattened, as if the letters have been in a press. Perhaps that means he did not reread them before he brought them over. I am glad about that.

What can I have written to him back then? Weeks and months that are like a black hole in my memory. A time when I was someone else, a more disgraceful version of myself.

The letters are there when I walk to the bird station early in the morning. The crackling does not let go of me until I have reached the top of the first gentle slope and the smells bombard me from every direction. The scent from the ocean, sometimes like wet slaps in the face, other times only like a mild, salty breath. The raw tang rising from the soil, the waterlogged fields. An almost metallic stench now, so early in the spring. And then the milder fragrances in the little pine grove I have to walk through before I can join the path along the beach. If it hasn't rained for a while, I can head across the fields, straight down to the sea. The sight of a lapwing, better still a pair of lapwings, signals that it will be a good day. The lapwings haven't had any chicks for two years. I hope it gets warmer soon!

Isa always runs ahead of me. She no longer strays off as she used to, but keeps her nose down to the ground. Just like me, she knows every rock, every tussock, every tree. But it seems like she is constantly discovering new messages, addressed just to her. While she uses her nose, I try using my eyes. I easily catch the faintest rustling movement.

Once you've started to notice birds, you find they're everywhere. It's easy to spot the northern wheatear who hunts spiders down at the shoreline, but in my earlier life I would never have noticed this tiny, blue bushtit bobbing up and down on the end of a sprig. Last year we observed this bird a record number of times. 84 bushtits in a single morning. They came from far away in the east, some of them had been ringed in Latvia. But many species are in decline.

There are fewer birds in the nets than is normal at this time of year. Some days there are only two or three chiffchaffs to retrieve. They don't struggle but resign themselves to their fate with a stoic repose that never fails to amaze me. There's only a small flicker in their small, shiny eyes when I put them into the little box to weigh them, when I clamp the small metal rings around their feet.

The letters crackle, it spreads to the body, electric. It's as though delicate, loose wires dangle and swing in my brain and now and again come into contact with each other. Fzzt. Crackling, shadowy images, some loose sentence or other. But the letters, why should I read them? I was someone else when I wrote them. Now I am myself again. Not myself as I was before. But myself as I am now.

I am the lady with the dog, people see us from the window. They are used to seeing us, we're out in every kind of weather. For a while after I first came here, I would run almost every

day. Jogs that could last for over an hour. But then Isa came and I contented myself with the long walks. In the morning to the station. When we finish up there, back again the same way. A longer walk early in the evening, first along the street for a while and then the tractor road down to the boathouses, maybe even all the way out to the old fort. Nearly the same every day. But the days are not the same.

I like to divide the day between the bird station and my home office. In the early morning hours, I often have company, Emma or Eivind and maybe a volunteer, the afternoons I have completely to myself. The translation work is lonely but never dull. I enjoy translating Laferrière. I have told the publisher that it is extraordinarily difficult. But it's not that difficult really, I just don't want to let go of what he and I have together. The precise words. The carefully chosen phrases, the wisdom in the sentences.

I admit that it's easier
to learn than to relearn.
But harder still
is to unlearn.

The long, quiet afternoons spent with his words. The slow job of getting them to ring true. Getting them to light up, to grow, to fill the room. It doesn't have to be much more than that. I don't need more, not anymore. But the letters. They trouble me. Should I open them or burn them? They can't just stay where they are, making a racket.

THE STATE

It was not me. It was not me who walked down the street like that. That woman in the black coat walked kicking the leaves, half-whispering in an angry voice. Behind her, a wheeled suitcase leapt and danced. Wet and decaying leaves plugged up the wheels on the small suitcase from time to time, but it did not seem to bother the woman. She kept walking at the same pace. Very few heads turned to look at her. No one knew what was in the suitcase. No one could have known that inside the wheeled suitcase was a dead cat. It was morning, a morning in October, it was overcast. An early frost had caused the trees to drop nearly all their leaves at once.

She had searched for and found him. It had been her husband who had first started searching for him online. Between the two of them they simply called him The State. It sounded a bit like Hate. Incredibly, The State had a profile on Facebook. He had not posted much about himself, but enough for them to find, through a few searches, his wife. She had the same last name and her cover photo was of a veranda flower box with red begonias. An unclear profile photo depicted a woman with dark straight hair who turned partly away. Apparently, he was married. Apparently, they had a veranda. And they had a cat, big and scruffy and with a murderous gaze. They had laughed a bit at the cat. But then they came across a photo of a child, a small, fair-haired child with a birthday crown and a birthday smile and chocolate smeared across her cheeks and at that they logged off. Then they didn't talk about it anymore.

They didn't talk about it anymore. But the woman could not stop thinking about it. Just think how easy it is to find things out about people. Just think how open it all is, so vulnerable, that one can simply enter anyone's life and mess around, mess things up. She revisited the page

again, studied the photos, the posts, went back several years in time. None of what the dark-haired woman with the begonias shared indicated that she was unhappily married with The State himself, a hard-hearted man. A man with unfashionable clothes and old-fashioned outdated opinions. Nor did the child appear to be suffering too much, even if she was pale and thin with dark half-circles under her eyes. The woman hoped the little girl would not be the first one to find the cat.

She had taken the tram up, the blue tram that rocked and jolted and clattered slowly through the curves and up to Kjelsås. There was nothing but the cat in the suitcase, stiff and cold, he was wrapped in a plastic bag from the supermarket. The woman did not feel anything, not for the cat or for the people who probably missed him, or for those who were going to find him on their stairs later in the day. This does not mean she was a bad person. But if anyone had heard how she spoke to herself as she walked, they might have thought she was crazy.

Her steps were certain, quick, she knew where she was going. Down this street with hedges or fences on either side, villas and row houses behind the hedges and gates, gardens with over-dimensioned terraces. In some places, the patio furniture was still outside. She had usually gone there late at night. Now it was early in the day and the street was empty. The windows were dark and vacant, in one garden an old man was raking leaves. There was a scraping noise. The wheels had become completely blocked. The woman stopped and thumped the suitcase hard against the sidewalk a few times and both heard and felt how the contents slid around inside. The cat. It was supposed to be a message. The message was: You are not safe. You. Are. Not. Safe.

The woman had been observing The State and his wife now for several weeks. They lived where the street curved, in a brown row house. Four verandas facing the street. There was no sign of begonias in their flower boxes, that must have been another year. Overall, the area around the house was rather unkempt. Through a ungainly lilac bush, the woman could see how the grass had been allowed to grow all throughout late summer until it now reached halfway up the large wooden patio table and plastic chairs that were scattered about haphazardly. Only the handlebar of the tricycle was visible. It had been in the same spot for weeks. But she was certain someone was there, the light was on almost every evening. She had glimpsed movement through the windows. On warm evenings, the door to the veranda might be open, a few times she had heard voices, subdued, it could have been from the television. One evening someone was standing on the veranda taking down laundry from a drying rack. The woman had passed quickly, casting only a brief glance to the side, saw that it was the wife, quite petite and in a blue sweater. Her movements had been fierce, it looked as though she had wrenched the clothes from the lines.

There were three more doors the woman had to pass before she reached The State, his stairway, this was her goal. The suitcase made even more noise behind the house, she had to grab the handle and carry the suitcase along. No matter, it was lightweight. There was light on in the apartment next door but it seemed empty and quiet. She took the chance. Hastily she opened the suitcase and took out the plastic bag. Three stairs up, and in front of the door a shabby doormat that had "Welcome" written on it. Welcome to The State and to his wife and child. Here on these stairs, she imagined, The State could put down the cases he had handled

that day. While he wiped off his feet, he could also shake off the thought of the letters he had signed that day, approvals for the lucky people and rejections for the unlucky.

She shook the bag gingerly and the cat slid out and landed halfway on the doormat. His body was distorted, one of his paws was bent up as if he had tried to defend himself. She should have killed their cat, The State's cat, of course that is what she should have done. But when they first saw him, they might think it was their cat lying there. She is not, and was not, the kind of person who murders cats. This was a cat she had found dead near the park next to where they lived. When she had found it, he had not been as stiff as he was now. She shifted the corpse slightly with her foot. Then she stuffed the plastic bag into the suitcase and, with brisk steps, walked back toward the tram stop.

THE BODY

How to begin? How to portray what happened that day? To portray it without being melodramatic. Portray it without it being too private. Maybe start off simply with the date? That it was a spring day? Dostoevsky opens *Crime and Punishment* like that, neutral and undramatic: “It was the beginning of July and the weather was exceptionally hot.” A sentence that foreshadows everything and nothing.

The door to the veranda was open and the neighbor boy playing in the garden would hear her cries when she opened the letter and read it. His face as he stood there, as though frozen to the neighbor’s lawn, would be what she remembered best from that day. She could not say anything to him, she could only close the door quietly and hope he had not been too frightened. Because her screams had been like they’re described in books. Bestial. Wild. Hoarse roars.

It was the end of April, and the weather was unusually hot. She had walked out onto the veranda to see if it was possible to sit outside and read when she heard the mailbox lid slam shut. Inside was a letter she had long been expecting. The logo on the envelope confirmed it was precisely that letter: *The Bureau of Child and Family Services East*. She weighed it in her hand as she walked inside. It was thicker than expected. Her heartbeat quickened, small thumps against her ribcage. She felt fairly certain that everything was alright, but the letter had been long in coming and as the weeks passed, her uncertainty grew. One is never safe. But it was only supposed to be a formality. And she was used to waiting.

She walked barefoot on sharp, sun-warmed stones from the mailbox to the stairs. The letter was heavy in her hand. Why was it so thick? She could feel her heartbeat all the way out

to her fingertips. She considered waiting until her husband came home from work. But her hands had already waited too long, they tore open the envelope, pulled out four closely-typed pages. The headline in bold font:

Rejection of extended application for pre-approval of international adoption after four years.

The Directorate of Child and Family Services, in accordance with The Adoption Act § 1 and earlier delegation from the Ministry of Children, Equality and Social Inclusion on December 12, 2003 has decided to decline your application.

She read the conclusion first and tried to go back to read the entire assessment. There was something about age, something about reduced energy with advanced age. But they *had been* approved. The same bureau had earlier evaluated and found them worthy and now they only needed an extension of their pre-approval. They had been on a waiting list for four years to adopt a child from China. Four long years of waiting, hope and more waiting. The authorities could not simply take back their approval, not now when they were mere months away from it being their turn to go bring home their child!

While it is understandable that an extension of pre-approval is sought in order to bridge lengthy waiting times, we have nonetheless been unable to take this into consideration when evaluating your application.

The cries welled up from a place deep inside her. They were sounds she had never heard from her own body before. She met the floor, having fallen or lain down. She crawled around, wailing. Banging and clawing at the parquet. How could the floor be there, be solid, sound, even as everything else was pulled out from under her? It was loss upon loss. But that was impossible. How can you lose something you don't have?

She managed to call her husband, who said he would come home right away. She managed to close the door to the veranda, briefly meeting the look of the child in the garden. The boy had stopped in the middle of his playing and stood there with an expressionless face staring up at their veranda door. It was a day at the end of April. It was a spring day, there was sun.

THE EXILE

It is the middle of April, the weather is cold with heavy clouds. What happened then is pressed together, layer of memory upon layer of memory, the years upon years have squeezed all of the air out of what was, pressed it flat. It does not take up any space. For my part, it can stay that way. I have never understood this need to open up, to rummage around and unearth everything that has happened. Naturally one has made mistakes, naturally one has injured someone else, naturally there is a lot that could have gone undone. Naturally, one can regret many things. What is gained by worrying about it? But the letters Olov brought here with him, these letters cause the layers of memories and shameful acts and public documents that are pressed tightly, tightly together, to fissure and bulge out and curl up at the ends.

I wander around in my tiny house, between the living room and the kitchen. There are only seven steps in each direction, with a worn-down threshold halfway. On the desk the computer screen is glowing. On the countertop are some coffee grounds I have forgotten to wipe off. The space is too small for my legs to build up speed in any direction. I put on my rain jacket and call for Isa. She lifts her head and yawns, looks skeptically at me, do I really mean it? She finally slides reluctantly off the sofa, stretches and yawns once more with an offended noise. Only a few hours have passed since we returned from the station and on the way back it started to rain. Whenever it rains, Isa wants to go straight home.

We stand on the front steps and stare out across the fields. Suddenly it no longer seems tempting to walk down to the sea, which is laid out like a nubby gray blanket. But in order to reach the woods and open meadows, we have to pass the house where Eivind rents the

basement apartment. I do not want to run into him now. I do not want him to see me and Isa, wet and downcast in the rain, I do not want him to think I'm keeping an eye on him.

The last time I walked there, it was a bit over a week ago, I guess, Emma was on her way out of the basement door. She was looking down as she came out, maybe checking her cell phone, and I tried to sneak past quickly. But I think she saw me, I am fairly certain she knows I saw her. She has probably told Eivind too. I have noticed that when the three of us are at the bird station together, they have become more reserved and somewhat wary.

No, I can't go past there. We begin our amble down the road. It is too early to take our afternoon walk but I still set our course toward the boathouse. It's slow going. I can't bear to yank on the leash, just stand there waiting until she's done sniffing even though my body is restless. My body wants to move, move fast. But every tuft of grass is interesting to the dog. She has taught me to be patient and take notice of the things around me. We are both more than halfway through our lives. But life passes more quickly for Isa.

I think about them. I think about them together, in his bed with tousled sheets. Or maybe on the leather sofa. She with her yoga-body, those small silver rings in her nose, her henna-colored hair. Her skin blemish-free, smooth and firm. Of course, maybe she was just visiting for a cup of coffee, discussing work stuff. But I don't think so. I had never thought about it before, it had honestly never crossed my mind, but the moment I saw her on her way out of his apartment, it seemed clear to me. They have a relationship. Their bodies, which surround me at the station almost every morning, know one another in that way. Maybe they kiss behind my back, what do I know, touch each other whenever they have the chance.

I wish I had not seen it. I wish I didn't have to think like this, to look at them in this way. It makes me feel uneasy. Together with the letters, together with the knowledge that in a few years Isa will no longer be here. Everything is moving toward an end, it all seems to be shifting pace. Something is about to crack open, and how can I stand another new start? I almost feel the desire to start writing again. Not letters, I am finished with those. But to write. The need to be in the world in that way. I think I wrote those letters to Olov to clarify things. To become more visible to myself. The old me and the new me.

But now I have the translation, the publisher nagging at me. They want to publish the book in the fall. They believe the author might win the Nobel Prize in literature, he has started rising on the ranking lists. Interpreting and rendering his prose poems is also a form of thinking, my job is to convey his thoughts as clearly as possible.

People come and go at the bird station. Now I am the one who has been there the longest, but I only work part time, and mostly in the three busiest months. Emma came from England with her degree two or three years ago, she is the one in charge of the ring marking. Eivind worked as a volunteer for a few summers the way I did the first years. And just as I did, he took a yearlong ornithology course to qualify for a more permanent job here. There are several volunteers and people working seasonally, they come and go, it is very international. But these are the two with whom I work the most closely, and now it has become too close.

Eivind spends most of his time out observing, counting the birds that flit past. But when he comes indoors with eyes that have taken on the color of the sea and smells salty and fresh, when we have meetings or have a cup of coffee together, when we sit close together in the

small office space working, how should I then behave? How should I bear that charged atmosphere, feel the waves of emotion washing back and forth between them?

We are down by the sea. Isa sits down in the grass, looks up at me. Yes, Isa, I know you would rather go home. The wind has picked up, tugging at the hood of my rain jacket. The sky is a chaos of clouds. The first years here I could sit for hours looking at the sky, at the endlessly shifting light and shapes. When the wind is blowing, I sometimes walk down here to the boathouses and stand leaning into the wind. Pressing into the wind all the words I would like to get rid of. On the way back home, the wind is a friendly, but firm hand that pushes me up the slopes and into the house.

A woman from New Orleans once talked about how hot it could get in her hometown and said that whenever the heat was at its strongest, she experienced it as a living creature staying close to her at all times. That's what the wind is like out here. A strong hand pushing people along, and a furious mouth far out that roars toward the flat coast and the battered houses and the people who shut their doors and stay inside. And there I am, leaning into this mouth, roaring back.

THE STATE

The woman wondered whether they had discovered the cat, how they had reacted. She wondered what they were doing, things were so quiet around their house. The patio furniture and the tricycle in the long grass, they would get ruined if they stayed out like that. She walked past slowly, the evenings were dark. It was late October, and everything was hemmed in by fog and rain. For a period, only the light in the hallway was on. But then lights were on again in the living room in the evenings. Not every evening, but someone was undoubtedly living there.

One evening, she chanced going around to the back of the house. The light from the windows fell some way across the path behind the houses, but she thought she would be difficult to spot if she stayed close to the tall hedge that grew next to the neighbor's property. Her clothes were dark, she pulled her hood up. Finally she stood squeezed up against the hedge at the far end, looking straight ahead at the entrance. To the right of it lay a darkened room. The curtains had been pulled shut, she could see a pattern with animals and birds, that must be the little girl's room. The kitchen was on the second floor but the entryway structure made it hard to look inside from where she stood. After a while she could hear raised voices inside and something that shattered. Then it went quiet for a long time.

She wanted to sneak away but then a man from the apartment next door came outside. He stood on the steps and lit a cigarette. She thought he must be able to hear her heart pounding. She thought he must see her pale face gleam in all the darkness. She thought of what she would say if he noticed her. She couldn't think of anything. And he didn't notice her.

Next time, she thought, next time I will go inside the house. A lot of people don't bother locking their doors. It is amazing how careless people are about such things. And when they are

sitting in the living room or arguing in the kitchen, I can go and stand in their hallway for a while. Find out how their home smells. I can open the door to their daughter's bedroom and look at the girl sleeping.

The man stumped out his cigarette and coughed. The woman held her breath. For a moment it looked like he wanted to walk toward her. What if he decided to come over and pee in the hedge? But he simply stood there for a while. Then he went back in.

The woman always returned home before midnight. On this evening, as on so many evenings, the living room was dark, her husband had turned off the lights and gone to bed. After his children had grown up and moved out, the evenings were long. They worked mostly, or sat each in their own corner of the sofa and read.

The man probably thought these evening walks did her some good. He accepted that she wanted to go alone. But by now she sensed that he had begun to give up, to let go of her. He hardly glanced up from his book or computer screen when she put on her walking shoes and the long, black coat and said goodbye. He did not know she took the tram up to Kjelsås and wandered around up there. How could he know she had become a *stalker*?

She knew what she was doing, knew what it was. She was someone who hunted and harassed another person. The cat was only the beginning. And now she was one step closer. She could already feel the shape of the door latch in her hand. She could already hear the breath of the sleeping child.

THE EXILE

Eivind has had visitors. I knew he was married and had children, he often goes home on the weekends. But suddenly they were here, he brought them to the bird station to show them around. Emma and I exchanged hellos with them. A cold draft came through the door that blew open behind them. We heard Isa's tail in even thuds against the floor. His son was a sweet little boy with the same sand colored hair and blue eyes as Eivind. Four years old. He hid behind his mother, who introduced herself as Paula. Her straight blonde hair was pulled tightly back with a single, black hairband. She seemed ordinary and sporty.

After they had said hello, Eivind showed the boy the ring marking equipment and then they went out. I sat at the window and watched them walk toward the lighthouse. Eivind held his son's hand, Paula had her hands in her jacket pockets and looked like she was freezing. A little family.

Emma sat in front of her screen squinting as if she was reading something with a tiny font. I had to get some air and went to make coffee. Isa got up and followed me out into the small kitchen. While the coffee maker gurgled away, I stood in front of the big poster illustration of the most common avian migratory routes.

When school classes come to visit, we use this poster to show them just how far many of the birds travel. We tell about the Arctic skua, or jaeger, who comes all the way from South America and the little stint that flies from the east coast of Africa. We get them to think about the wetlands around the bird station as a crossroads where birds from all over the world come to enjoy a meal and a break before they fly on. Then we show them our equipment, they are allowed to touch the rings that we put around the birds' feet. Some very, very small and some a

little larger. Then we show them how we are able to capture the birds in nets that don't harm them.

The teachers are amazed at how calm and interested their students are. But it's not so hard to hold their attention when we can tell them that a little tern is able to fly as much as 40,000 kilometers every year. If the Arctic tern reaches the age of 34, which it often does, it has flown a distance equal to three round trips to the moon. Everyone should know this. At the end of the presentation, Eivind or one of the other volunteers takes the students down to the bird hide, to take turns peering through the telescope.

Eivind didn't bring the telescope along on this day. But after walking around the lighthouse, the trio disappeared over the bank heading toward the bird hide. I poured coffee into the thermos and brought it and a few cups, into the office. I set them on the table in the corner without saying anything. Tried to avoid looking at Emma. Isa lay her chin on my desk and stood there studying us. The whole thing was quite strange.

I didn't see Paula again, but I saw their son the next day. It was Saturday, the wind blew too heavily along the ocean and Isa and I walked the path up past the apartment that Eivind rents. Then I caught a glimpse of the little boy in the garden. He was standing outside on the grass, alone, in blue overalls with a hood. His face gleamed inside the hood. Nearby lay a red and yellow plastic truck. He was probably meant to play with it, but he was not playing. He just stood staring straight ahead as the wind tugged at him. I wondered if I should go into the garden and talk with him. Instead, I sped up and walked past. When we got back from the forest, both the boy and the toy truck were gone.

The atmosphere is tense in the bird station after Eivind's wife and son have been here. No one speaks much, Eivind is outside a lot of the time, and I have undertaken a large clean-up project. I go through the equipment, sort old diagrams and throw out what I can. I'm praised for my initiative. We still drink coffee together in the late morning before I go home. We talk about the birds that have been caught in the nets that day, compare them with numbers from previous years.

I look at Emma's restless fingers and I look at Eivind's broad, beautiful hands. My own hands are black under the nails after having dug around in my rock garden. Grit under the fingernails, I think is the expression. And it's true, my hands are a gritty sight. They've started to look old. But the perennials are on their way up in spite of the cold and gray weather.

THE BODY. LETTER

Oslo, July 20, 2010

To The Ministry of Children, Equality and Social Inclusion

Dear Minister,

After having been on the waiting list for four years to adopt a child from China, The Directorate of Child and Family Services (Bufdir) decided on July 6 that we would not be able to adopt after all: We are too old.

The directorate has concluded that the conditions of the adoption law § 2 have not been fulfilled and that the adoption would be unbeneficial to the child. The Bureau of Child and Family Services (Bufetat) region east arrived at the same conclusion a few months earlier. We appealed the rejection but Bufdir did not take this into consideration. In our appeal, we offered to meet with Bufdir's case workers, but they did not see this as necessary. The only official we have met throughout this adoption process, an advisor at the Grünerløkka child protective services, recommended in her last report from February this year that we should be allowed to adopt—in spite of the fact that we are now 50 and 48 years old. She described us as positive, warm, mature, youthful and healthy.

Bufdir's main argument for rejecting an extension of our adoption approval was our age. The previous approval expired in February this year. The adoption law, as you are aware, does not state an upper age limit for who may adopt, only a lower age limit of 25 years. A directive advises that approval should usually not be granted to applicants over 45. Exceptions may be made if the applicants have special resources in relation to children. Emphasis was made that these guidelines should not automatically exclude applicants over 45 years old who are in particularly good physical and mental health and who have good qualifications. We believe that we fulfill these conditions and that Bufdir's rejection of our appeal is thus based on arbitrary discretion.

The rejection stated that though we have "experience and knowledge related to children that is not held by all adoption-seekers," we do not possess "special resources in relation to children" in the opinion of Bufdir and thus our experience does not carry weight. We are offered no reason or explanation for what might comprise "special resources in relation to children", if raising two children ourselves does not satisfy this condition. Both of the children for whom we have had shared custody for many years have been looking forward to welcoming a younger sister or brother from China. Since 2006, the adoptive child has been a part of our family. If we are now unable to receive her or him, it will constitute a loss that we must live with for the rest of our lives.

Bufdir also agrees that we have a strong social network, but Bufdir even turns this against us, with the formulation that “the family network reflects the applicants’ age, c.f. the information in the complaint that the male applicant’s two sisters in Oslo have adult children and grandchildren.” Bufdir knows how old we are, and should need no additional “reflection” of this by referring to the age of our family members. We were trying to show that our child would have a large family network with people of all ages, also children of the same age.

We understand that adoption must be regulated and are not requesting a new interpretation of the laws. We only ask for the respectful assessment of a family that has ended up in a somewhat unusual time crunch. One solution that might help more families in the same situation, would be to give Bufdir the opportunity to put in place some simple transitional arrangements for those of us waiting for children from China.

When we added our name to the list at the Adoption Forum in 2006, there were nearly 200 applicants ahead of us. Now there are only 14. We earnestly ask that this decision be reversed so that we will have the chance to bear this long “pregnancy” to its conclusion and finally become parents together. After this long process and the wait that we have endured, and now that we are only a few months away from the bestowal of a child, we believe that this rejection from

Buudir is extremely unfair and inhumane. We request that it be reversed and also request a meeting about our case.

THE EXILE

On my bookcase are two thick volumes of the Norwegian Bird Ringing Atlas. I got them on my first visit to the bird station. Maybe they wanted to clean out their storage, maybe they could sense how interested I was. This was before Emma, before Eivind. I no longer remember what his name was, the man who showed me around. But he was nice, and eager to share his knowledge with me.

I saw a linnet for the first time. Maybe I'd seen a linnet before, but you look at birds in a different way when you know their names and how they feed and a bit about how they migrate. The man who guided me around told me the linnet we saw had probably wintered in Belgium or France, maybe even as far south as Spain. He handed me the binoculars and pointed toward a low rock wall. It was a lovely bird. Small, gray-brown with red on its chest and brow.

When I got home, I opened to a random page in the bird ringing atlas. It's a game I often play on my own whenever I get a new book, or if I'm stuck on something and need to move forward. I open to a random page and read a few lines, probably in the naïve belief that these lines will tell me something important. Transforming unimportant things into important ones is no great art. In the bird ringing atlas, I opened straight to an entry about the mandarin duck. Under "Ringing and recovery data", there's a whole little story.

Only two birds have been ringed, and both have been recovered. They were two tame birds that were ringed and released at Ekeberg in Oslo in 1962. They left the area in the beginning of November the same year and were both shot the following day far north in England, after having flown 914 kilometers.

The Norwegian bird ringing atlas is full of small stories like that, matter-of-fact but still—or maybe precisely for that reason—unexpectedly beautiful or brutal. When it comes to the mandarin ducks, I probably got hung up on the year, which is the same year as I was born. I was also struck by the grandness and futility of an entry like this. A story of a couple of arbitrary lives on the earth told in three brief, unsentimental sentences.

That was when I lived with Olov for some months, to recover, gain solid footing again. It wasn't by chance that my footing was to be recovered with him, and in this village, since Olov supported me without asking any questions. He didn't blame me, he didn't offer suggestions, whether good or bad, about how I might turn my life around again. He was just there. I just went there. I just stayed there. One day, Olov started to talk about the bird station on the outskirts of town, at the very tip of the cape, close to the lighthouse. And when he talked about the bird station, I could feel, for the first time in a long while, that something awakened an interest in me.

I'm indebted to him. I'm indebted to Olov. It's been far too long since I last went to visit him. I don't need to say anything about the letters. And I know him well enough to rest assured he won't bring it up if I don't.

He's still patient with me. Just as patient as when I first arrived. His big house took me in, I was given my own room with rose-patterned wallpaper and soft lights and cozy rug on the floor. Something totally different than the sterile walls that had surrounded me the previous months. I was given a room where I could begin to forget. And after a while he found me this house. It's a bit off by itself, but not too far away from the other houses. It is small enough for

me to feel safe in and yet large enough to feel free. And after I had lived here for a while, Olov showed up with a dog that needed a new home. She was going to be put down if no one took her in.

I didn't want her, then I did want her after all. Isa was an adolescent without a proper upbringing, without boundaries, she chewed on everything, my shoes and my jacket and my hands, she had sharp teeth. She peed on the floor and howled at night and followed me everywhere and drove me to frustration. She would lie with her nose pressed up against the crack of the door every time I shut the door between us. Her breath coupled with a quivering whine. It made me feel like I was locked in again, this time with a hairy monster. But there was no way out of it, and eventually we fell into a rhythm, a pattern, a cohabitation, a life-form. Isa is all I have.

But I have Olov too, I have the bird station, I have my work, Laferrière. He writes from a different perspective and fills a void. And, of course, I also have Eivind and Emma. They comprise a large part of my life, but what kind of space do they fill? My feelings for the two of them are mixed. In a way I feel sorry for them, but mostly I notice the annoyance. Do they have a plan, do they see the big picture? Do they know what they're building up, what they're tearing down? Do they know how easy it is to lose everything?

I shouldn't think so much about it, it doesn't do me any good. But I always picture that little boy out in the garden, stiff and listening.

THE BODY

She thought she could detect an undertone of contempt in the letters from Bufdir. It was a contempt that disseminated into her own body. Only a short while ago, she hadn't known that a directorate like Bufdir even existed. Now this directorate had suddenly become her entire life. Bufdir, Bufdir, Bufdir. Heavy-light, heavy-light, heavy-light. It was like a beat, it set the rhythm of the day. She walked to the rhythm. She worked to the rhythm. She slept to the rhythm, as though lying on a train headed full speed into the night, the rails singing and screeching. Buf-dirr, Buf-dirr, Buf-dirr.

Your joint experience as caretakers was acquired at a time when you were both significantly younger than you are now, and in addition you shared custody with the children's mother.

All these clerks and department directors they had been in contact with and whose familiar names and signatures they had come to know so well, they still remained faceless. The cabinet minister had a face. Maybe that is why they had written to him personally, maybe that is why she was constantly talking to him in her thoughts. He was not one of these faceless clerks who had now become incorporated into their lives in such a strange, intrusive manner. An army of women and men whose job it was to have opinions about them, opinions about age, resources, who evaluated their "personal suitability". The cabinet minister was above all such pettiness.

Dear Minister,

If the Norwegian state believes we are not qualified to take care of a child, this needs to be better justified—especially given that other applicants over the age of 50 have been granted an extension of preliminary approval.

But they didn't get a reply from the cabinet minister. They didn't even get word that their letter had been received. So, one day she called the department and asked about just that. Yes, the woman she spoke with could confirm that the letter had been received. She could not tell her more. Could they expect an answer? She did not know, but believed the case was being worked on.

The department has, as the superior authority, the opportunity to reverse the decision. According to the Public Administration Law § 35, the superior agency may reverse a decision if the change does not cause harm to anyone toward whom the decision is directed. A reversal of this decision would not be of harm to anyone. On the contrary, it will constitute a joyous occasion for very many.

We are also convinced that it will be beneficial for the child.

Could she be so certain that it would be beneficial for the child to come to them? According to the case managers in Bufdir, their "energy would be reduced with increasing age." She began to study people, there were a lot of older adults with small children. Of those who appeared older, it wasn't always easy to figure out whether they were in their forties or if they were over fifty.

She thought how she herself might look in ten to fifteen years. How might it be for a child to put its cheek up against hers when it was no longer smooth? And when the child grew older, would it be ashamed of them at school graduations? Would the other children ask if they were the grandparents?

Men can reproduce until they are old and gray. It didn't seem like people thought there was anything unnatural and gross about older fathers. Why was nature so unjust? She felt as if her body had already begun smelling differently. She got back problems and had to start going to the chiropractor. Whenever he tugged on her joints, they creaked and groaned.

THE BODY

Oh, yes, dear minister. There's one more thing.

The male applicant might be 64 years old when the child is confirmed. He will be an older father, but if we had received the child before the previous approval period had run out, he would have been 63 years old upon the same occasion. Does this one year really constitute so big a difference that we should lose our approval?

THE STATE

The first time she tried the door, it was locked. But the next time she tried, the door opened easily, swinging outward without a creak. The woman slipped inside and managed to shut the door noiselessly. She stood still and held her breath. This must have been late October, perhaps early November. It smelled of wet coats. These hung to her right, coats and jackets and overalls in a jumble hanging on two rows of hooks, one high up on the wall and one row lower down, for the little one.

From the entryway, a new door led in to a somewhat wider hallway. There were rugs covering the floor, she could walk further in without making a sound. To the right was the door that led into the child's room, then came the stairs from the second floor and straight ahead was another door, presumably leading into the parents' bedroom. On the floor was a pair of men's slippers, a candy wrapper and a brown teddy bear on its back with its legs in the air. By the wall was a white chest of drawers with a plain mirror above it. A pile of newspapers and advertisements were stacked on top. There was also a keychain, three keys attached to a ring with a small reflector. So careless. Leaving the door unlocked and the keys out in the open. The woman wrapped her hand carefully around the keychain and put it into her pocket.

The house was completely still. No footsteps, no voices, but she could sense there were people in the house. Someone was sitting upstairs, maybe they were listening like she was. Sitting completely still with their heart in their throat trying to decide if they had heard correctly, if there was an unusual noise down in the hallway. Maybe The State's wife was home alone. Then she could run the risk of The State himself walking through the front door and bumping straight into her. If he did, she had her plan ready. While he was hanging up his jacket

in the entry, she would sneak into the parents' bedroom, which she figured faced the garden. She knew there was a door leading to the garden from the front, what she did not know was whether the door could be opened from the inside. But she felt certain she would have enough time to get out or hide while The State unlaced his shoes and put on his slippers.

She bent down and picked up the teddy bear. It was that hand-knit type of stuffed animal, with two shiny buttons for eyes and a mouth embroidered with purple wool. She yanked out his eyes and put him on the chest of drawers. The bear sat there facing the stairs with his peculiar smile. One of the eyes still hung by a thread and had fallen almost down to his mouth.

That's how it is, The State. You who give and take. You who think you see us.

On the way out, she carefully opened the door to the child's room and peeked in. It was dark, she couldn't see anything. If the little girl had been asleep inside, she would probably have had a night light on. And it would have been possible to hear her breathing, to feel the warmth from the tiny human. But the room felt cold and empty. The woman shut the door quietly and cracked open the entry door. The coast was clear. She pulled up her hood and calmly walked out.

THE EXILE. DANY L.

I had never heard of Dany Lafférière until an editor contacted me and asked whether I'd be interested in translating one of his books into Norwegian. I had to check and found out he'd just been voted into the French Academy. That alone was enough to make me accept the job of translating him. Then I read *L'énigme du retour* and was spellbound. I cannot describe it in any

other way. Here I sit, in my tiny house by the sea, as far away from the meteorological and political climate of Haiti as I can get, following this man who, after having lived in Canada for almost his entire adult life now returns to Haiti following the death of his father.

To be a foreigner even in the city of your birth.

There are not many of us

who enjoy such status.

But this small cohort

is growing even larger.

In time we will be the majority.

I'm not sure why this book has made such a strong impression on me. And I wouldn't dare assess if it would have the same strong effect on others. The form is unusual, the boundaries between narrative prose and poetry is fluid, almost nonexistent. The text has a calm, thoughtful tone. The context, on the other hand, is brutal, painful. The father, who was forced to flee Haiti due to the dictator Papa Doc's rampages, doesn't open the door when his son calls on him in New York. A few years later, Dany L. receives a call from a nurse who has found a note with his name and telephone number on it in his dead father's pocket. A life lived almost entirely without a father, who also insists on dying alone.

There is too much fathering in the world, wrote the author Gertrude Stein in *Everybody's Autobiography*. "There is too much fathering going on just now and there is no doubt about it

fathers are depressing. Everybody now-a-days is a father, there is father Mussolini and father Hitler and father Roosevelt and father Stalin and father Trotsky and father Blum and father Franco is just commencing now and there are ever so many more ready to be one.”

This quote is from 1937, a long time before Papa Doc. His fathering consisted for the most part of taking children from their fathers. A lot of people grew up without fathers, some want to be fathers to everyone.

THE BODY

At Hotel Bristol, the bar was cozy and quietly buzzing as usual. It was like stepping into a different dimension, from the slick, rainy streets and the harsh November fog into soft carpets, piano music and the promise of eternal sunshine. In one of the leather chairs sat a woman in a red sweater with a pad and pen in front of her on the table. The journalist. They had spoken on the telephone earlier. This was to be a nonbinding conversation.

The journalist was working on an article for the newspaper *Dagbladet*. Over the phone she had suggested that they might have been victims of discrimination. She had found evidence of a notable discrepancy between the manner in which the different regions of Bufetat handled applications. She had the numbers in front of her. Statistics from the Directorate of Child and Family Services clearly showed that the bureau from the region east, which had processed their application, had the highest percentage of rejections of all five regions in the country that handle adoption applications. The previous year, five times as many adoption seekers had their cases dismissed from the region east as from the region north. This number was not only due to the fact that so many people had been on the waitlist for years and had thus become *too old*. A comparison of the averages back to 2004 showed that the percentage of rejections in the north was 4.5 whereas in the east it had been at 12.5 percent over the past five years.

“So, if we had processed our application in Trondheim we might have been approved?”

The journalist nodded. “It can appear so, yes.”

The surprise held some happiness. Here, finally, was someone who was grasping this, who was trying to permeate the impermeable. The journalist who sat there so young and healthy in her red sweater, had uncovered numbers and facts that clearly showed the system was skewed. Now she was looking for the personal stories. But should they lend their story and their faces to the newspaper? Would it help their case? She and her husband had discussed it, and they had serious misgivings.

The journalist said she could understand. But she wanted to hear their story, regardless. She seemed to be very engaged. She said it was because she was friends with a couple whose application was rejected because they were both academics. The Directorate didn't think they would be able to prioritize a child due to their academic careers.

"It actually seems like skepticism against intellectuals is embedded into this system," she said. "Or against couples with high status professions and good salaries."

"But how can that be possible? Is there any research on this?"

"No, there's not. One of the officials I interviewed used a doctor he knows as his witness. The doctor had the impression that children who were sent to so-called 'resourceful' families had a harder time than children who came to more ordinary families. Because the children weren't able to live up to their parents' expectations. And maybe that's true in some cases, but there aren't any statistics on this, no numbers."

They sat for a while without speaking.

"I would very much like for you and your husband to front this topic," said the journalist. "Think it over. You would be the perfect *case*."

She promised to think about it. She went home, depressed and uplifted at the same time.

Finally something was happening. And she knew they would be a perfect *case*. But was it a perfect *case* they wanted to be?

THE EXILE

Yesterday I visited Olov. I invited myself via SMS so he would know I was coming. He had made pea soup, the whole house was filled with the smell. He had probably been cooking a hambone all day long. But first I was offered a glass of sherry. I don't know anyone else who serves sherry before dinner. But then again, I don't go to many dinners these days.

There is something ceremonial about visiting Olov. First you are invited into the green living room, offered a glass of sherry and then shown to a chair. Olov sits down in another chair, between the two chairs is a small table and on it are the glasses of sherry. And there you are to sit and look at the view and converse.

Olov knows there is usually not much noise in me, so he chatted on about his day, about the various people who had stopped by the workshop. I don't know half of them but it was nice to just sit like that and look out and listen to Olov intoning. From one of his living rooms there is a view of the ocean. Yesterday, the ocean and the sky met in a straight, blue-grey line. On the line, a huge tanker drifted slowly past, as though it was a toy boat pulled along with a string.

Isa, you stayed home, I am still branded by your questioning gaze when I said goodbye and shut the door behind me. I couldn't bring you with me, you are losing your winter coat and you leave behind large tufts of hair wherever you go. Not so good for the Persian carpets.

Olov runs a workshop in his basement and people pop in all day long to chat. He had to get rid of the sofa he used to keep there because people would stay for too long. Olov knows a lot about the people who live around here. He can repair anything that breaks, people bring him the most unbelievable things, but he prefers working on old pieces of furniture. His house

is filled with old objects, and every object has a story, just like the people who stop by his workshop.

I like hearing his stories about the objects. To most of us, a jug looks like a jug. But it has been produced someplace, maybe in another country, maybe in a factory that got shut down decades ago. And then the jug has traveled, from house to house, from cupboard to cupboard, from shelf to shelf, and has been used for lots of different things, and has been a useful object to some, to others a decorative object. Now the jug is decorative, it stands like a big, yellow-brown piece of candy on a bureau together with other objects in varying shades of brown and yellow. I appreciate sitting here, surrounded by strange and beautiful and mute things.

Olov ladled up steaming soup from a big tureen. Big ladle, big, deep soup bowls, big silver spoons you can just about fit in your mouth. While we ate, he asked everyday questions, about Isa, about how the translation is going, about the bird station. I felt a strong urge to tell about Emma and Eivind but managed to hold back.

Only a few nights ago, I had such a lifelike dream about Eivind, we were standing in a little room, maybe a closet, and he touched me with very warm and dry hands. He put his hands on my face, on my shoulders, then he held around my arms. It was like a blessing. When I woke up, I could still feel the warmth from his hands, a physical impression against my cheeks, around my arms.

As I thought about this, Olov suddenly said something that made me tune in again. He said he had decided to move his workshop to the city, to get a few more clients and maybe a few less people just dropping in to chat. This came out of the blue. I asked if he had already found a spot for the shop in the city, if he was planning to commute or to live there, practical

things. And as he talked about his plans, I struggled to contain the sudden feeling of panic. My mind went completely white, like a heavy snowfall. Was it so scary that Olov might move? He won't be gone, he will live here on the weekends and a lot of other times too.

Olov relayed all of this as he studied me, said that every now and then he was going to spend the night in the backroom of what would be both his workshop and store. And I said that it sounded smart, that a little change is a good thing. We both heard how strange it sounded when it came out of my mouth.

Olov carried the empty bottle of wine and the half-full soup tureen to the kitchen and called in to the living room that he would make coffee.

As I sit at my desk today, my feet resting against Isa's stomach, I think about these rituals we go through, those of us who are invited into Olov's rooms. Sherry in the outer sitting room with a view of the ocean. Dinner in the blue dining room where the family portraits on the walls watch us coldly and discerningly as we eat. Coffee is served from the silver pot, and this takes place in the inner sitting room. It is a farmer's sitting room, with red-painted log walls where there is just about space for a small settee between rosemaling cupboards and chests.

When you are at Olov's, you are out of the world, out of time. But even there a lurch can take place, a shift in pace, as happened yesterday. Olov, my one fixed point, is moving. As seldom as I have seen him recently, you'd think it would not matter. But it does matter. What if I suddenly need someone and he is no longer here?

The April light is merciless, white and hard, I have to turn the light on the computer screen up to maximum and when I lift my eyes, I see the windowpanes are gray. Salt from the

winter storms has covered large swaths of the glass with a sticky film, and it's time to wash them, for the storms usually let up for a while in April. These intense storms that throw themselves against the walls like there is a gang of giants trying to get in, they bring the sea with them up across dry land and fertilize the grass so it turns an intense green. I stand up and open the window a crack. In a tree some way off, a blackbird sits singing as though he might burst. There were lots of different birds in the nets today. As many as eight redbreasts, five blackbirds and one song thrush. I can still feel the shape of the small, round feathered bodies in my hands.

Isa woke when I stood up, and now she lifts her head slightly from the floor and gives me a look that says, sit down again, keep on scratching my belly. I do what she wants, scratch her slowly with my feet, and she sighs contentedly and falls back asleep. I know the blackbird is not singing for us, that he is singing to attract a mate or else to chase other blackbirds away from his territory. But it is still nice, to think he is singing to please himself and all those who might hear him. His song makes me feel both upbeat and melancholy. In the middle of the document I write *syrinx*. I look at the word for a while. It looks like the name of a rock band. But it is the name of the fantastic voice apparatus birds have in their throats, that which enables them to make so many sounds. I delete the word, save the document. I won't get any more done on the translation today after all.

I should have found peace by now. Here I am, with the knowledge that I don't owe anything to anyone. Here I am, pretty sure no one is going to come knocking. No one wants anything from me anymore, there are not many who could say or do anything that would change things. The

phone is on silent, as it has been for several years, I pick it up now and then to check. The mailbox is tidy, manageable, I mostly find messages about work, mail from the publisher or newsletters from the Norwegian Ornithological Society.

From my old friends, who tried to contact me at first, there is only silence. They approached me in various ways, calling, sending texts, writing letters, they said I didn't have anything to be afraid of, I should know they wanted to be there for me, that they didn't judge me. But I knew they judged, of course they did, and I wanted them to, and not to pretend. Couldn't they just judge me and keep quiet? And eventually that's what happened. The most persistent ones kept trying for a while, but most of them gave up pretty quickly.

Lena, who knows both Olov and I, didn't give up. She even came to visit once, without warning. Olov wanted to send her away, but I said it was okay. And so we sat there, Lena and I, in Olov's sitting room with the view to the sea. Lena tried to start a conversation, she asked me cautious questions, and I gave brief answers.

Don't they understand that I don't want to know, I don't want to hear how things are going with everyone else from my old life? If I let them in, there's no knowing when some information I don't want might be divulged. I certainly don't want to know if my husband has remarried. He might have gotten together with a young woman and had a child, how painful would that be. How painful to know that all of that still exists, without me.

So, I sat there saying as little as possible, not asking about anything. After a while Lena suggested we go for a walk. We walked along the beach, the wind blew so that our hair danced constantly in front of our eyes. Her hair has gotten so much lighter. She has also gotten older. A very slight double chin, small wrinkles at the hollow of her neck. So, she couldn't avoid it either.

I pulled on my wool cap, Lena didn't have a cap so she walked holding onto her hair. Said it was lovely there. So unbelievably lovely. And then she left. That same year I received a Christmas card from her. It stayed in the mailbox for a few weeks and when I finally found it, the ink had seeped into the paper and even through the envelope.

The April light falls in through the glass, and I only feel unease. Where is the joy? Everything is here now, everything I love. The light, the spring, the birdsong.

THE STATE

The keys were in the pocket of the jacket when the woman went to work the next day. She clenched it tightly. There were three keys, two of them were the normal door keys with sharp teeth that cut into her hand. One of them must be to the front door. The other was perhaps a work key? The keys gave her a sense of power. She felt more livelier than she had in a long time.

After her conversation with the principle, she had felt both ashamed and enraged. She considered quitting as a teacher and living solely as a translator again. But she knew what her husband would say. He would say she needed to get out, that it was good for her to be around other people, to have responsibility, colleagues. And she liked walking like this, in the morning light, being a part of this human stream rushing to their jobs.

The last time she had made an attempt to freelance, she often found herself wandering around the city gazing longingly in through the windows of compact office spaces where people bent toward their screens or sat talking across the table, talking and nodding, it looked professional and proper, and at the same time warm and cozy. When you work with other people, you can discuss things, work or what happened the night before. You can go over to the coffee machine when you need to stretch your legs, offer to get a cup for a colleague too, you become a part of something larger, part of a community.

The principle had clearly been upset when she sat down on the chair by his desk. The air in his office was heavy, there was a smell of ripe bananas. The last time she had been in this office was when he had hired her.

He fidgeted with his pen. There had been complaints from several of her students, he would like to hear her own version. She said it like it was, that she was having a hard time at home right now, that it was difficult to concentrate. The principle knew about her situation, everyone did. He suggested the usual things. A few weeks off, a shrink. She said she wanted to think about it, asked for a few weeks' time to see if things might work themselves out. But there were more teachers who were struggling with their students being lazy and unmotivated, it was especially bad in one class. Was it maybe someone from that class who had complained? The principle looked troubled. What do you do, she had asked, when you walk into a classroom and half of the students are lying across their desks asleep with their heads on their bags? He had agreed to give her some time but emphasized that he would need to see an improvement quickly.

The frost had crept in last night, leaving behind thin lace trimmings of rime on branches and puddles and curbsides. Now the sun was finding its way between the buildings, making the city sparkle. She was early, and even though she had not been able to prepare for her class, she knew what she wanted do. She would select a text, copy something by Duras or Sarraute, ask them to put their books aside, she wanted to serve them something that could rattle them a bit. She was going to wake them up, and when she was done by lunch time, she would take the tram up to Kjelsås. Walk that familiar road. Try out the keys. The air was fresh. She felt strong.

THE BODY

It is horrible to see oneself die without children. A quotation she found in Joan Didion's *Blue Nights*, the speaker was purportedly Napoleon Bonaparte. She tried to find the original

quotation in French, she searched for *horrible*, *terrible*, and *cruel*, with no results. She also tried to find out in which context it was said. After all, Napoleon had a son with his second wife, Marie Louise, in addition to two stepchildren from his first marriage and at least two illegitimate children. He hardly needed to worry about going to his grave without any progeny. But maybe he was thinking about everyone who had sent their only son off to war?

This sentence hit hard, it was as if her heart skipped over a beat when she read it. She thought the quote would not feel as strong in Norwegian, which probably had to do with the word horrible. Horror. She did not know of a Norwegian word that gave the same feeling of an endless fall, darkness, dread.

The dreadful year? The terrible year?

The year of horror.

The frightful year.

After so many years of miscarriages, in the end to be singled out for this final, state-mandated abortion.

Some might think this expression is too strong. State-mandated abortion. It is important not to be steered by one's emotions. To stick to the case, to stick to the facts. The facts are a pile of papers pressed together in a file folder. Inside are all the letters of the case, the entire exchange between state and citizen. What are the lyrics to that song?

Let it go.

Let it be?

No, because there is another impulse: Bring it into the light. Let people pass their own judgment, over the state and over the citizen. In this case an adult couple who has been waiting

for a long time to adopt a child from China. They chose not to be reduced to a case. They could have been on the front page of *Dagbladet* newspaper. She still wondered if such publicity might have helped their chances. Most likely nothing would have happened at all. Nothing apart from them remaining a case. They would always be the couple who was not allowed to adopt. She would always be The Childless.

They had to wait a long time for a reply from the Ministry. Did they believe the minister would read their letter? No, but someone would read it. Someone had to do something with it, at least respond to it. They had also written letters to all of the politicians in the Committee for Family and Culture, of these only one had replied. This one letter, at least, was written with some human warmth.

Perhaps they were naive. But they had been born at the start of the 1960's and had grown up believing that the state exists for its citizens. That the state serves its citizens, which was after all the original intention. They had grown up thinking about the state as a mild and knowing and upright father, who existed first and foremost to take care of them. But now they had met the state as the legal guardian that he also is.

She thought with dread about all of those who had to place their entire lives in the hands of a state authority. Those who had no choice but to stick their *entire* head into the jaws of the lion, the lion that was emblazoned across the national coat of arms. Anyone applying for asylum or welfare. Anyone who sustained accidents or illness and needed help. So many people were dependent on a yes from a municipal or state agency in order not to go under, to be able to move on with their lives. So many of these might not have the same resources and stamina as they did, they might not even have the language.

But then, how much had language helped them in this? They were both eloquent, or so they had believed, up until they started their word feud with the bureaucracy. It felt like in the fairy tales, just as they managed to cut off one head, two heads grew in its place. Every argument was turned into a counter-argument. Every criticism of the bureaucracy's argumentation led to new humiliations, devaluations of them as parents and human beings. That is, if the troll even bothered to emerge from his den in the first place.

Months had passed with countless letters and telephone calls. Months of horror. But just before Christmas, they received a letter from the Ministry, a letter that sparked a tiny hope.

We have received multiple inquiries regarding the age restrictions for applicants of prior consent for international adoptions. For this reason, the department has issued further clarifications of the guidelines for international adoptions. Due to these letters, Bufdir has thus been directed to go through cases starting from April this year to present in which age has been a factor in dismissal. Bufdir has been asked to evaluate whether or not there may be a basis to reverse some of these cases.

If your case is among these relevant cases, you will be notified by Bufdir.

Aren't most people decent human beings trying to do their best?

THE BODY. NEW LETTER

Oslo, December 19, 2010

To: The Bureau of Child and Family Services

On July 6th of this year, we received a rejection from Bufdir on our application for a renewal of approval for adoption. We are of the opinion that the handling of our application was unreasonably strict and were surprised by subjective argumentation in the rejection. As we then indicated in the Public Administration Law paragraph 35, we thereafter sent a complaint on July 20th to The Ministry of Children, Equality and Social Inclusion in which we requested a reversal of the decision. On December 9th, the Ministry sent us a copy of the letter that was sent to Bufdir on December 1st, in which it asks Bufdir to reevaluate cases which, starting in April of this year, have been rejected on the grounds of age. From this communication, we understand that our case is now being reconsidered, something which comes as a great relief and joy for us.

As we are now quite close to having a child assigned to us from China, the timing is of utmost significance for us. We ask that our case be handled swiftly, and that particular consideration be given to the fact that an assignment is imminent.

In order to avoid any further misunderstandings about us and our application, we permit ourselves to request a meeting with Bufdir before our case is reevaluated. This

case is extremely important to us, and we believe it is a minimum requirement that those who decide how our future life will look, have met with us. We will then also have the opportunity to provide supplementary information.

We hope for a response soon.

THE EXILE

A whole catch of willow warblers today, but also one European pied flycatcher and a meadow pipit. Twenty birds in all, it's starting to pick up now. And the reports predict warmer weather ahead, fortunately.

Emma came in late today, and Eivind didn't come in at all. I usually arrive first and open the nets and then put on the coffee and check the online newspapers before it's time for the first collection. I had brought in four birds and was busy marking them when Emma arrived. She only said hi, threw off her bag and went directly to her desk.

"Don't you even want some coffee?" I asked. She said she would wait until later.

"So now you've come, you rascal?" she said, taking the flycatcher out of the canvas sack. "This is the first one this year, isn't it?"

"I think so," I replied. "Maybe this should be bird of the week?"

Emma thought that was a good idea, so now I am going to write a little text about the European pied flycatcher for our website. The one we got from the net today was a male, they always come a week before the females. They want to find the best nesting spots and bird boxes so they have something to show the ladies when they arrive. The females often have several good nesting places to choose from. And if the male is able to attract more than one, that's okay too, in the world of flycatchers.

Emma began measuring his wings. He flapped a little at first, but was all calm when she put him into the canister to weigh him. She works faster than I do. I know her movements so well. We work side by side almost every morning and don't have to talk much. After we had freed the birds again, we took a cup of coffee each and sat on a bench sheltered from the

ocean breeze. The morning gleamed like newly polished glass, and it was cold. Emma went inside and got a blanket for each of us.

“It’s strange that Eivind hasn’t come yet,” I said.

“He had to go back home a bit early,” said Emma.

“He did?” I said. “Did something happen?”

She glanced over at me. “He sent an email about it,” she said. “You must have gotten it too.”

I had just checked my inbox and knew there was no email from Eivind there.

“And what about you,” I said, “are you doing anything special this weekend?”

She said someone was visiting her from England. Then I remembered that we had talked about it, we had agreed I would take care of the marking this weekend, together with one of the volunteers.

“Yes, you mentioned that,” I said. “Your brother and mom? That will be nice.” She nodded. Yawned. Leaned her head back toward the wall and shut her eyes.

The world around us stood still. The fields, the bushes, the stone wall. There’s rarely anyone else around the station so early in the day. By late morning it picks up, everything from bird enthusiasts with enormous camera lenses to tourists who have just come out to see the lighthouse. But by that time of the day, I’ve usually headed home.

I started to wonder if maybe Emma had nodded off. Her lips were pale and thin, there was a slight quivering under her eyelids. But then the wind snuck around the corner and a tendril of her long hair landed in her coffee cup. She opened her eyes.

“Yuck,” she said. She sighed and said we should probably do another round.

I had to stretch out a little, had gotten stiff from sitting on the hard bench. Emma walked down the bank, toward the net that has been strung up in the little pine grove. Her hair is like flames against the green. She often lets me take the easiest jobs. It isn't necessary. My body is strong, even if it gets stiff easily. I have never had a ferret-body like she does, but I appreciate my body. It's not perfect in any way, but it is healthy, and it is mine.

But in one crucial respect my body has betrayed me. I have never understood it. Why this body, which has served me for more than half a century and functioned so well in every way, could not manage to bear a child. I've googled and brooded and consulted with many doctors, but the answers are vague and the theories varied. So many of the body's secrets are mapped out, while some things having to do with pregnancy and maternity are still shrouded in a mysterious gauze. It is a slim comfort that the mystery of my own life is part of the great mystery of Life.

My hips have been bothering me for some years, but it's been a long time since I felt as stiff as I do today. It is as if my legs were screwed on tight. Emma has taught me some exercises that help a little, but I often start them too late, when my muscles have already locked up. "Our emotions settle in our hips," says Emma. Typical yoga teacher talk. Then again, it's not so illogical, that grief and rage store themselves somewhere and turn to stone. I never had any pain to complain of before I got in trouble with the authorities. A two-year battle against windmills necessarily has to leave its mark.

Emma says I should come with her to yoga, but I just can't. I catch a glimpse of them now and then when I walk past the school in the evening, all these women packed in together on mats in the gym with their rears in the air. I feel claustrophobic just at the sight. Emma probably thinks I'm hesitant to join because she is the instructor, that it might be embarrassing in some way, and maybe that is part of the reason. But just the word "group" makes me go cold. Group workout, group conversations, group activity.

I have never been to Emma's place, but I know where she lives. She shares a house with an older lady who she helps out in the garden. I see the house when I bike into the center of town to go shopping. There's nothing special about the house, but the garden is glorious all summer long. There is always something in bloom. Tourists stop to take pictures. Sometimes I see Emma's back when I cycle past, she spends a lot of time weeding.

Emma blends in so nicely with everything around her. Even with her red hair, she is harder to distinguish in the landscape than those guys who show up here in their camouflage suits and stomp all over the farmlands with their lenses and tripods. She is nondescript and yet enormously distinct. People like her, but I don't think there are many who know her. I have never seen her with a boyfriend.

Why did Eivind have to go home one day early? He must have left yesterday afternoon or evening. Could his son be sick? This makes me feel unsettled. I can't make myself write anything. I have tried to write a simple text about the European pied flycatcher. After I didn't make any headway on it, I started on the afterword that I promised to write for the Laferrière edition. But I couldn't do that either. I have to go over to the corner cabinet to check that the

bottles are still there. Merely looking at them makes me feel calmer. Every now and then I need to see the white pill bottles, weigh them in my hand, give them a shake.

Isa is my medicine, and our walks together. But she probably does not want to go for another walk now, we walked the entire way out to the fort after work. Maybe instead I should bike into the center of town. Look over Emma's hedge and see if I can catch a glimpse of her family. And of course, I could stop by and see Olov, come unannounced for once, ask if he needs help packing.

But my feet are heavy, my head is heavy, my body is as if filled with lead. I cannot decide on anything. I cannot get up from this chair.

THE BODY

It was early in April, almost one year after they had received the first rejection. Her op-ed was on print in the *Aftenposten* newspaper the same day that the Norwegian adoption authorities gathered to decide on how to handle cases like theirs. *Almost A Mother*, read the headline. She hoped her words would penetrate through those stone walls, into the stone hearts of those who sat there making decisions.

Six days before the op-ed was printed, the event for which they had been waiting for five years happened. The Chinese adoption authority had allocated a new group of children, and they could have become the parents of one of these children if their adoption standing had been up to date. Now they could do nothing. Days and nights came and went. The nights were like a single long breath. If Bufdir and the directorate would decide to let them adopt, they would get a child in the next round. The only thing they could do, was to wait. Hope was threadbare. Hope was a frayed strand, as thin and frail as the strand of DNA that curled around in her genes.

There were so many thoughts she could have, and which she did have. She could think that the child who was supposed to come to them had now been assigned to someone else. It was a strange word to use about a child, really, that it would be assigned. But it wasn't easy to find a more precise word. Maybe it was even a good word. A child is born unto you. A child is given unto you. A child is assigned unto you.

On this day, the 1st of April 2011, someone had been assigned a child. They had received a name, a photo, a few facts about age and health and where the child was staying. Where it could be picked up. How often had she imagined how it would be to travel to China and meet

the child for the very first time. Sometimes the caretakers would bring the children to the hotel. She had seen pictures of that, rows of caretakers in light uniforms with children who were being assigned. The first glance, the first touch. Would the child be scared, would it reject them? She had thought it was important not to force things, but to allow the child time to get to know them. She most often pictured a little girl, but there was also a chance it would be a boy, she could also imagine the little boy body, the weight of him in her arms the very first time she would hold him. The woman who was now able to hold the girl or boy was most likely as overwhelmed and happy as she would have been.

Having children is not a human right, but everyone has the right to desire it. We get to hold them in our arms for a while, and then they want out, to get away, wriggle free. They wriggle, we have to let go, they disappear out into the darkness, into the darkness that is the future. They take a part of us with them and become something completely different than us.

THE BODY

There was a new letter in the mailbox, bearing the eventually familiar logo of Bufdir. Only five days had passed since the op-ed *Almost A Mother* had been published, and the announced meeting between Bufdir and the ministry had taken place. She could not wait this time either for her husband to come back home. Perhaps she believed she had become hardened. She opened it.

The letter was signed by the two case workers who had met them in the Bufdir office on the fourth floor at Pilestredet 27. He dark, in a slightly too-large brown suit jacket. She light, in a freshly ironed white blouse. His was the name they most often ran up against in their contact with the adoption authorities. The name had begun to give her the chills. He had become her nemesis, someone she could not avoid. A judge over her life. Her authoritarian father of the system.

Oslo, April 11, 2011

In your letter from 12.19.10, you requested a meeting with Bufdir. The meeting was held at our office on 02.15.11. In the meeting, you claimed that both the content and the formulation of the rejection of your application from 07.06.10 was unacceptable. According to you, Bufdir had shown poor/faulty judgement. You further claimed to meet the guidelines' requirements for exemptions regarding the recommended age limit of 45 years, as you maintain to be in excellent health and have special resources relating to children. The female applicant submitted a medical certificate at the meeting, which

states that her health and life expectancy are very good. Furthermore you asked in the meeting for a concrete clarification of the meaning of the phrases “excellent health” and “special resources relative to children”.

From Bufdir’s point of view, the meeting emphasized that the older one is, the more stringent the demands must be for those seeking to adopt—and that at some point the exceptions (such as good health) can no longer be said to compensate for the disadvantages caused to a child due to their adoptive parents (in an adoptive context) being too old.

We see that the female applicant has documented her particularly good health, and that you both have experience with children from being, respectively, a father and a stepmother. We do however maintain that these reasons are not sufficient for us to reverse our decision.

She felt the pressure from the system. The coldness from it. The coldness in these words, the hardness that lay in such language. Such sentences could not have been produced by humans. She was only one of several people who received such letters, but she still felt the pressure, a colossal weight, the words carried with them something that would mark her life forever. She read the letter one more time and could not hear a human voice in it.

But she was still breathing. She no longer crawled around on the floor, howling. Instead, she folded the letter and put it back in the envelope. Put the envelope between the other

letters and documents in the file folder that was getting quite full. Then she took it out again and put it on the table so her husband would see it when he came home.

THE STATE

That it should have come to this. The woman stood in front of The State's bathroom mirror, studying herself.

"He's just doing his job," she said out loud. "It isn't personal." Her voice sounded wooden inside the bathroom. She was in her case worker's house, and she was not there by invitation. It had gotten personal.

"Children need parents, not grandparents," she said in an artificial voice. The face in the mirror did not look old, at least it was not the face of a grandmother. But The State saw it differently. The State and his people had seen her, in the end they had felt pressured to meet her. That was a year and a half ago, but the meeting still sat in her body like a slowly turning knife.

She made a face at her reflection. Was what The State saw really so different from what she saw? Yes, she had started to get obvious wrinkles in her forehead and around her eyes, soon they would plough deeper, but had not yet started to appear around her mouth. She must avoid getting the kind of puckered mouth some older women had. Of course she would get older, but people age differently and at different paces. Age was certainly not an objective value, as The State had claimed in the meeting.

She opened the door of the little cabinet that hung next to the mirror. Jars of creams, tubes with ointments for stings and cuts, hair products, a bottle of mouthwash, an electric shaver. She took out an elegant bottle made of smoke-colored glass, it was aftershave. It smelled surprisingly fresh, of green leaves and citrus. Shouldn't The State stick to something

more old-fashioned, the scent of wood and leather? She poured the contents into the sink. The smell filled the entire bathroom. She placed the empty bottle back in the cabinet.

The living room was messy, but not more than one might expect when visiting unannounced. The woman stood in the middle of the floor, listening, while she tried to take in what she saw. She did not have a flight plan. But it was still early in the afternoon. In one corner there was an over-full toybox, and still there were toys everywhere. A door led out onto the veranda. The plants in the windowsill looked thirsty. On the coffee table were newspapers and remote controls and a half-eaten apple.

Aside from a messy bookshelf, the living room had a light and cheerful feeling. She didn't know what she had expected. Not this light cheeriness, in any case. She had only met him twice, and then she had thought he could might as well have been a teacher or a priest. He reminded her of a few other types she had come across in life, self-righteous men with power and knit-sweaters. Christian and honey-dripping, but passive aggressive in every way. She could feel it all the way into her hip joint, the veiled threats that hovered beneath the mild voices, the talons clenched within the docile cat's paw. All these guardians surrounding her all her life. Always this hidden menace.

Those who are appointed to help and to guard have the power, she thought. The power to bore holes into one's dustiest corners with their gaze, or what's worse, to look away. The power to make one happy or unhappy. The power to be just and unjust. You know it, you can feel it when you meet a person who likes having that kind of power. It is apparent in their eyes, you can hear it in their voice, you notice how you shrink when you meet the fatherliness in them. She remembered his gaze in the meeting, how it had hardened when he was confronted

with the numbers that the *Dagbladet* journalist had uncovered. And his eyes as he sat there silently in the courtroom, two hard, black bullets.

But now she was standing here, in the middle of his living room. She walked over to the bookshelf. Novels and travel books. But look, there was an entire shelf with books about administrative law. *The Modern State*. The woman mumbled the titles of the books, one by one. There was actually a book with the title *The Child's Best Interest*. These words had gnawed at her, had gnawed at life itself ever since the first letter. In combination, these were the four most effective words the authority officials had at their disposal. Useful for ending all discussions, together with the words "overall assessment". That would make a good title for a textbook for bureaucrats. *Effective use of the term "overall assessment."* Instead, she found *Individual decision-making: justifications and complaints*.

So, here was the basis on which he built all his theories and rulings. *One State for All? A* title with a question mark. He who had not asked her a single question. Throughout a meeting that lasted an hour and a half, he had not asked them about a single thing. Neither he nor his colleague were interested in knowing anything about them. The colleague with her pretty white blouse who sat there and hardly let out a peep. Was she the one who had stated to the newspaper that women these days wait too long to have children? If only she had known.

The woman took a step backwards, away from the bookshelf, stepped on a toy. It was a red doll's shoe made of plastic. She put it in the toybox and went into the kitchen. The first thing she saw was two cat dishes on the floor, one of them half full of dry kibble. On the counter was a cutting-board covered in crumbs and bits of tomato. She absent-mindedly opened cupboard door after cupboard door. Nothing out of the ordinary. High up in one of the

cupboards was a whole collection of small, white plastic bottles. The woman usually had such things in her kitchen cupboards too, medications and vitamins that accumulated and that she couldn't make herself throw away.

In the cupboard under the sink, the trash bin was almost overflowing. So, they didn't sort their trash in this house. The woman tapped the trash bin with her foot, but it just disappeared further into the cupboard. So she grabbed it resolutely and tipped the bin over. Plastic and paper and apple cores slid out, some of it landed on the floor. From a package that had contained minced meat, a thin stream of blood ran down to the bottom of the cupboard. She didn't wait to see whether it would drip onto the kitchen floor. In the living room, she went back over to the bookshelf and took out *One State for All?* She placed it in a noticeable spot on the coffee table, on top of the newspapers.

Before leaving, she glanced quickly into the downstairs bedrooms. Unmade beds, it smelled of sleep and dust. In the girl's bedroom it smelled of something else as well, a sharp, indeterminable smell. On the bed was a stuffed animal, a rabbit with long, soft ears. He had once been white, now he was a mottled gray. The woman walked quietly out of the room and stood for a little while in the hallway listening before opening the door. She jumped when something soft brushed past her legs. The cat. He slipped passed her, big and motley, and ran up the steps. She heard pawing in the dish upstairs. She would leave them to wonder who had let in the cat.

THE BODY

How do you know when it's time to give up? When should you say, I've done what I could, there's nothing more to do, it's time to move on? When? It was spring, but it was a cold spring or a warm spring, what else happened this spring?

She stood in front of the counter at the fish shop in Youngstorget square. As she waited her turn, she decided to buy a whole side of salmon. She would cut small slices into it and fill it with lime, chili and ginger before putting it on the grill. They were going to grill, so it must have been late spring, or in any case it was pretty warm. Maybe their first dinner outside in the garden. She was looking forward to it. The children were with them. They would sit under the big pine tree, she would put on a table cloth. Were they celebrating something? Probably just the spring. They had taken out and washed the garden furniture the day before. This was the best time.

She was up, and now she pointed at the side of salmon she had picked out and then went over to pay. In those days, the fishmonger Moe still worked in this locale and someone, usually a lady, would sit at a little checkout in the middle of the store taking payments. She stood there ready with her receipt. Over near the large freezer, she noticed a man and a little girl. The girl's voice was delicate and sweet, she might have been about five years old. They were talking about what they saw inside the freezer case.

"And what is that?" the high voice asked.

"Those are tiger prawns," her father replied. "We don't have those kinds of prawns in Norway. These ones came all the way from Australia. And look at this! They even have a sword fish! You know, the kind of fish that has a really, really long sword on its nose."

“Oo-oh,” said the girl. There was silence for a moment. “But where is the sword?” she asked.

“They probably had to take it off,” said her father. “Because you can’t eat it. The things they put in this case are things you can eat.”

“No! Because the sword is so long, they couldn’t fit it in,” said the girl.

Someone nudged her. It was her turn to pay. When she had been given the bag with the side of salmon and her receipt, she took her time arranging everything inside her bag. The father and daughter were still looking into the freezer case. He said something about sea urchins and then she said “Ewww!” And then they laughed, both of them. She felt the tears that suddenly sprang into her eyes. She hurried out, while the little girl’s laughter still rang like a cheerful bell in the store.

She stood outside fumbling around for her sunglasses in her bag. As soon as she got them on, she felt better. She began to walk toward the tram stop. It crunched beneath the heels of her shoes. The city streets were still dirty and gritty after the winter. But soon a fleet of small sweeper trucks would come and tidy up. Brush, wash, rinse.

She inhaled deeply, wiped away the dumb tears, a few had landed in the hollow of her neck. Wasn’t this painfully simple? All of a sudden it was clear to her. This is the point, after all, she thought. This is what it’s all about. To walk hand in hand with a child and tell about all the strange and wonderful things that exist in the world. To care for it. To answer its questions, to explain.

And then she knew. She could not give up. There had to be a solution, there had to be something more they could do. She would gather up new strength. But, was there time? The

weeks passed, the months passed. She had always believed there was enough time, we live so long. She had pictured life as an elastic band, in which she could extend time, stretch out the good moments. But now she stood at a point where it was suddenly too late for many things. Doors were closing around her at a furious pace. Time stood still at the same time as it surged ahead. So ruthlessly. "Time, like an ever-rolling stream, bears you fast away."