

Cy Mathews

A Story of Loss

9 year old Anja Petrović was walking to school one day when she came across a small worm lying on the pavement singing. Anja was a native speaker of Serbo-Croat, with rudimentary knowledge of French and English; the worm, however, sang in Kurdish, so its song remains un-translated. Anja lived in a small house in a large village with 9 siblings and a father, a lens maker. Her mother, dead, lived at the bottom of the garden. Every evening her father would cook enormous pots of thick red stew, flavoured and coloured with paprika, tomatoes, chillies, and various varieties of beet. First he would serve Anja and her sisters, then take a bowl of the stew down to his dead wife. Finally, he served himself. Anja slept in a large bed in a small room at the top of the house, her siblings each in a bed and room of their own, in some cases in small beds in large rooms, or large beds in small rooms, but rarely in small beds in small rooms, or large beds in large rooms, and never in medium sized beds or rooms, of which there were none in the house. That night at midnight Anja woke up to find a small worm on the ledge outside her window singing. It sang in Ukrainian, thought not fluently. Anja went to sleep. If she had understood Ukrainian, she would have known the worm was singing a medley of translated Ian Dury lyrics. When she woke up in the morning the worm was gone. Two of her siblings were in the garden however, tossing a ball to one another and singing in Swedish. Anja pulled the curtains shut and fell back asleep, like a fish into a net.

A Story of Error

One day there was this tiger. It was having toast for breakfast. It was pouring itself a cup of tea. It was spooning spoons of sugar into the tea, one, two three. It was buttering its toast. Decisions, decisions. Marmalade or honey? Vegemite or jam? The end of the world or the beginning of it?

No, that's not it at all.

One day there was this tiger-trainer. He was cooking himself breakfast, ham and eggs. He was brewing coffee. Outside, through the window, it was raining. From the sky. Decisions, decisions. Rain from the east, or rain from the west? Eggs over easy, or sunny-side up? Ham, at least, is straightforward. Fry that ham, flip those eggs, and coffee, coffee. And then, to work; three fat tigers and a naked woman.

No, that's not it either.

One day there was a naked woman, wearing clothes. She was pouring out herself a bowl of cornflakes. She was squeezing out a glass of orange juice. She was looking out the window at the sunny day. Decisions, decisions. A blue sun, or a yellow one? A tiger was walking through the garden. From the house next door, there came the odour of frying ham.

Maybe that's it.

Once, a long time ago, there was a tiger-trainer, three fat tigers, and a naked woman. They came to the edge of a river. There was no bridge, and the water was too deep to walk in. There was, however, a little boat. It was only big enough to take the trainer and one tiger, or one tiger with no trainer, or one tiger with one naked woman, or one naked woman with one tiger-trainer, or no tigers, and no trainer, and no naked woman. What to do? Decisions, decisions. That river; half empty, or half full?

A Story of the Old Days

Once there was a strong man. Twice there was a strong man. He was stronger than two men, stronger than three, than four. He was standing down at the beach, on the yellow sand, in tight black trunks, lifting weights. Children and dogs ran to see him. He grinned, flaring his long bright yellow moustache. He tossed a steel bar far into the air, and caught it. He ran into the sea, his big feet making heavy holes in the sand. He swam.

He swam far out, farther than anything. Far out, he turned and, treading water, looked back at the shore. Hundreds of children and dogs stood watching him. He roared with laughter and turned back to the open sea. He swam a long way further out. The shore was now deserted; the children and dogs had gone home to dinner. A few lonely streetlamps were beginning to shine, and higher, and lonelier, a few bright stars. The strong man snorted through his moustache. He turned back out toward the horizon. He swam, and the early night came down and swam beside him, and below him, and all the way overhead.

Back on land, the children and the dogs had finished dinner. Now they snuck out, away from televisions and bath-times, back down to the beach, now black in darkness. They made their way down to the edge of the salt water. They leaned down; the children became sharks, the dogs became eels. They, all of them, hundreds upon hundreds, slipped into the water. A thousand submerged shapes made their way out towards the deeper oceans.

Three times there was a strong man. Four dozen miles from land, he carved handholds out of the growing waves, climbing the sloping back of the world. He sucked in big breaths of air and salt water through his long yellow moustache. He winked at the grinning stars above him, squinted at the darker depths below. He felt hands and fins lift him. He was lifted. Everything drained away like water from a bath. He felt himself rising.

This is a story the immigrant tells his children as they go to sleep at night, his slow mouth moving behind his blond moustache.

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