

YOKO TAWADA

FROM MEMOIRS OF A POLAR BEAR

TRANSLATED BY SUSAN BERNOFSKY

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“I promised to write down your life story. But so far I’ve only been talking about my own. I’m terribly sorry.”

“That’s all right. First you should translate your own story into written characters. Then your soul will be tidy enough to make room for a bear.”

“Are you planning to come inside me?”

“Yes.”

“I’m scared.”

We laughed with one voice.

I became a government employee and rode around on my bicycle all day long. After the first month, you could see the muscles on my thighs and calves. I could ride faster and thus saved time and no longer felt I had to rush, so now and then I would practice bicycle acrobatics in a park or even right there on the street.

Once I tried to do a headstand on the bicycle. “You need a special bicycle for that, a custom-built model,” a passer-by said. I wanted to engage him in conversation, but he was already gone. I began to sense on my skin the presence of spectators. When I had an audience of even a single person, it was no longer a paranoid delusion, it was a proper rehearsal. And if a rehearsal was possible, there might also — some day — be a premiere.

I trained ever more diligently. One day I was observed by a relative of my boss as I clattered down some stone steps on my bicycle and I received a stern reprimand. Worried about the bicycle, the boss exclaimed: “You aren’t working in a circus, do you understand?” It had been such a long time since I’d heard the word “circus.” It was true enough, just as the boss said: The Telegraph Office was not a circus. The circus was where I wanted to work.

The war broke out before I could start my new life in the circus.

“I envy the inhabitants of the North Pole. There aren’t any wars there.”

“There aren’t any wars. But people with weapons keep arriving all the same. They shoot at us.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. I’ve heard that humans hunt instinctually. But instincts are a mystery to me.”

“I think hunting used to be important for human survival. That’s no longer the case, but they can’t stop. A human being, perhaps, is made up of many nonsensical motions. But they’ve forgotten the motions necessary for life. These humans are manipulated by what remains of their memories.”

My father returned home once during the war. I saw a man walking back and forth in front of our house. I don’t know what gave me the idea that it could be my father. He looked at me in such a way as to signal that I should follow him. We walked for a while until we reached the bank of our small river, where we sat down on a bench. I looked at his yellowed fingers holding a cigarette stub. “I started torturing animals as a child, just the way many adults torture their children. I killed animals — a cat, for example. I plunged my knife into her heart and was able to watch calmly as she died. It was important to me not to lose my self-control. I required ever new victims, in the end I even killed an army horse. The military thought it was an act of anti-war resistance.”

I told my mother about my encounter with this man. She was furious because she thought I’d made up the story. “It isn’t possible that your father is still alive. You can’t go around telling people nonsense like that.”

The Telegraph Office soon closed, I lost my job, and began working in the armaments factory along with my mother. On Sundays I washed our clothes in a tub and cooked for us. I would walk into town carrying a large cloth bag to buy the week’s food. The people I would see on the way had roughly whittled faces. When two people who didn’t know each other crossed paths on a desolate street, they would exchange distrustful glances. Fate might at any moment turn anyone at all into a murderer or a victim. The sight of a soldier standing at an intersection was enough to make me start shaking, even though the soldiers were ours. But what did that mean: ours? Every soldier was prepared to kill. My wish was always that he would shoot somebody else instead of me. I was forced not only to suffer hunger but to be distrustful too. When winter came, it brought not greater hunger but a hunger more intense. My eyes were constantly mistaken, and I rarely raised them from the ground. In the mirror I saw cracks in my skin. It wasn’t just me — others I saw in the street had ruined skin too. Their eyes were inflamed, and they

couldn't stop coughing. My mother was afraid I might accidentally tell someone about my father. "If anyone asks, say that you were separated from him as a baby and can't remember anything."

The neighbors' eyes sometimes spoke a language I couldn't understand. I often turned around while walking, as if someone had pasted an invisible label on my back. I imagined being arrested and forced to stand against a wall to be shot. "Why do you keep bringing up these fantasies? There's no reason for anyone to arrest you," my mother's voice said. My nose was strangely reprogrammed, and I smelled the dead bodies, a vague but persistent odor, and I didn't know if I was imagining it or not. It was practically a miracle I was still alive. My mother once asked me if I was a member of a resistance movement. But for this I was too apolitical, alas — I didn't know anything at all about the resistance.

After the big air raid, the city's walls and roofs collapsed to form heaps of rubble. When I could think again, I'd been evacuated to a factory building, and the woman lying next to me was my mother. When the moonlight shone gently on the windowsills, the smell of sweat from all the people packed in together intensified, lethally cloying.

I found a scorched lump of iron and thought it had to be the corpse of a bicycle. I began to collect useful items and fragments of broken objects and machines and sold them to a workshop. But even when I managed to come by a little cash in this way, it wasn't easy to exchange for decent bread. For this reason I was glad to have the opportunity to visit relatives who had a farm outside of town to help in the fields. I still remember the turnips and cabbage, and especially the rutabagas.

The Telegraph Office was reopened. Among the new management, there were only fresh faces to be seen, and none of them wanted to offer me a job. I helped acquaintances of my mother's and was given food in return. I cleaned everything that was dirty, and tried to procure everything that was lacking. I also took part in the city's rubble-clearing operations. "Why do I feel so lonely?" I asked Tosca.

"You aren't alone. I'm here."

"But no one except me believes I can speak with you. Sometime I wonder if it's even true. Lots of people want to talk with me — but not about the war, they only want to talk about the circus. They always start their conversations with the same question: How did I end up joining the circus? I tell them that as a child I helped out at Circus Sarrasani,

and when I was twenty-four, I was accepted at Circus Busch as a cleaning woman. No one wants to hear about what happened in between. They say: We all know about the war. It's not that I want to talk about the war, it's just that it makes me nervous to have a hole in my circus biography. A hole that big might one day become my grave."

"I'll listen to you."

"How can I be sure it's you? How do I know I'm not dreaming?"

Somewhere a dog barked. "Rich people were resurrected after the war as rich people, even though their money had burned to ash. Don't you find that strange?" This wasn't Tosca's voice, it was the voice of a vital young man. His dog was named Friedrich. Friedrich would always jump up on me when I came to the apartment and try to lick my face with his large, moist tongue. "Class society doesn't vanish in a war. On the contrary: The difference between rich and poor is increased by a war and during the post-war period. For this reason we need a revolution as soon as possible." The young man, Karl, had chatted me up on the street. I was quickly drawn into a conversation, it felt as if I'd known him a long time, so I followed him to his apartment, which was filled with vintage furniture. His sofa and bed didn't look as if they'd been subjected to an air raid, in fact there was nothing in his apartment that appeared in urgent need of repair or replacement. The books on his shelves, unlike the furniture, were all recent. I pulled out a book with a red spine. Before I'd finished reading a paragraph I'd chosen at random, I found myself being embraced and engulfed from behind. I was all bones, and my breasts were only just starting to show signs of future roundness. His hands boldly crushed them. With all my strength I twisted my head around, he placed his hands a bit lower down, applying pressure to my abdomen while using his chin to hold my shoulder in place the way a paperclip holds a sheet of paper.

"It was like a lightning bolt from a clear sky. I didn't have time to long for love, to fall in love, or even to notice the taste of my first kiss."

"And if you had gotten pregnant, Nature would have quickly attained her goal."

"Nature, for all her greatness, is small: All that interests her is dividing tiny cells into even smaller ones. I can certainly understand that my heart is of no particular concern to Nature. Cell division and more cell division, that's all she cares about."

"Did you go to see Karl every day?"

"We immediately started fighting."

“Why?”

“I talked with his dog Friedrich too much. Karl didn’t like that. Maybe that was the bone of contention.”

One day I contracted a high fever, it went to my head and swept away my thoughts. I was sent to bed, my mother filled a bag with ice cubes, I heard the glassy clicking sound of the ice, and then coldness surprised my burning forehead. I heard my mother speaking with a doctor, their voices withdrew. My consciousness wanted to travel to far-off lands. I stood in a flat landscape, a snowscape, the snow blinding me. Staring into it, I saw a snow hare leaping across the snowfield, and a moment later he vanished from sight. With every step I took, the shaft of light changed its angle, negating what it had showed me just before.

A snowy wind boxed my ears but it didn’t feel cold. The frozen ground was milky as a pane of frosted glass. Through it, I saw the water and two seals swimming by, probably mother and child.

After a long journey I woke up and felt something wild, unripe, unpredictable inside me. I kicked off the wool blanket, quickly got dressed and slipped into my shoes. My mother tried to stop me — she wanted at least to know where I was going. I myself didn’t know. Walking made me dizzy and I lurched but didn’t fall because the wind was propping me up on both sides. Before me I saw an advertising pillar on which a poster bloomed like a bright tropical flower: Circus Busch! I studied the dates and saw that the final performance had taken place the day before. In front of the pillar stood a bicycle that wasn’t locked. I sat on the metal horse, pressing the pedals with all my strength. The city fell away, a field of rapeseed received me in its yellow arms, and far off in the distance, a circus caravan was crossing the horizon.

Left, right, left, right, I pushed down on the pedals as if possessed, terrified that the rickety old bicycle would collapse beneath the pressure I was putting on it. I panted, spinning the wheels of my dreams, trying to catch the images flashing past in my brain. Eventually I caught up with the procession of circus wagons and from atop my rolling bicycle asked a man sitting in the last trailer where they were going.

“To Berlin!” he replied.

“Do you have performances in Berlin?”

“Yes. Berlin is the greatest city in the world. Have you ever been there?” At this

moment it became clear to me in a flash that I wanted to go there too. Could I manage it with this bicycle? The sky suddenly grew black.

“You’d better ride home as quick as you can. It’s going to start pouring in a minute.”

I looked up, and a fat raindrop fell right in my eye. “Please take me with you to Berlin!”

“Not possible. Maybe the next time we’re in town. We’ll pick you up.”

“When?”

“Just be patient and wait for us.”

I woke up and saw that I was lying in my familiar bed. My mother said I’d been asleep for two days. I still had a high fever.

“You’d better go to the doctor. Your illness is coming back. You seem off somehow.” It wasn’t my mother saying this to me, it was my husband.

“Huh? What do you mean by *off*?”

“You don’t answer when I ask you a question, and your eyes have a strange gleam.”

There was something off about my husband. That’s probably why he was telling me I was off.

Was my fever dream the place where I caught up to the circus troupe on that old bicycle? One week later I happened to see a poster for Circus Busch plastered on an advertising pillar in town. Their engagement had ended just one day before I’d had the dream. I kept this discovery from my mother. You can’t reproach a child for never telling her parents what occupies and troubles her heart. It’s just a childish attempt to become an adult. Parents, on the other hand, would much rather lie to their children than reveal their weaknesses. If my mother had suddenly lost her nose, she would have covered her face with a handkerchief and told me she had a cold. What was great Nature thinking when she gave us these characteristics?

“You say I shouldn’t have conversations with your dog. It’s not an insect I’m talking to. A dog is as much a member of the class of mammals as we are. Why shouldn’t I exchange words with my fellow mammal?” This was the argument I used to defy Karl’s prohibition. When he started shouting, I could feel his body temperature rise: “A human being is fundamentally different from a dog. But what’s a dog, really? Just a metaphor.” Karl loved the

word “metaphor” and used it to intimidate me. After I told him about my lifelong dream of working in a circus, he replied: “The circus is nothing more than a metaphor. Since you never read actual books, you believe that everything you see is real.” Lovelessly, he threw a volume of Isaac Babel in front of me. I haven’t seen Karl since then. For a long time, the book stood in a corner of my bookshelf, observing me resentfully. I didn’t expect Karl to ever come back to me, but I wanted the circus to come back.

“You can wait for him as long as you like, he’s never coming back.” I returned to my senses. Before me stood my husband. He grinned and went on: “I locked him in the bathroom.” Since I thought my husband perfectly capable of imprisoning Honigberg, I turned my attention to the bathroom door. But it was Pankov, not Honigberg, who now emerged with a self-satisfied expression and asked: “Something wrong? What’s the matter?”

“Where’s Honigberg?”

“Right over there!” Pankov’s finger indicated two people standing behind me immersed in conversation. The one with his back to me was unmistakably Honigberg.

I knew that my husband’s nerves were worn thin and vulnerable. If one more shred of nerve ripped, he might attack Honigberg, fatally even. This thought left me no peace. As a child, I repeatedly dreamed of a dog and cat trying to kill each other and would try to the best of my abilities to prevent this mutual murder. But the desire to kill danced about wildly in the air, provoking both of them and seducing them into this struggle to the death. It was my task to end their battle as quickly as possible. I was still an infant, and already my head was filled with worries. The one thing I don’t know is what my worries looked like without language.

I didn’t want my child to witness my husband causing harm to a human life. Perhaps it would be me he attacked, not Honigberg. Perhaps in the end he would be his own victim. Best for my child to go on living with my mother.

If I’d ever given serious thought to how my husband would die, it would have been clear to me what his end would look like. But from where I stood in the middle of life, I was incapable of seeing anything in sharp focus. Otherwise I’d have been able to predict the fall of the Berlin Wall and its effect on my life. The GDR perished, and so did my husband.

When I raised my head, Pankov placed a notebook with white paper on the table and said: “This is a gift for you. I don’t want you using our important documents for your manuscripts.” Ever since the Soviet Union had given us the polar bears, Pankov had avoided the word “gift.” So it was all the more remarkable that he used this word now, giving me permission to write. I thanked him but went on writing on gray recycled paper.

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