

BRONKA NOWICKA

**A COMB
A NEEDLE CUSHION
POCKETS
TO FEED THE STONE**

TRANSLATED BY KATARZYNA SZUSTER

A COMB

— Find a louse, and you'll get a penny — says grandpa.

He puts a 20-dollar bill and a fine-toothed comb on the oilcloth.

A fleshy scalp: I look down at it, standing on a stool. The comb ploughs the skin — leaving white lines that soon turn pink. The head is down. Grandpa's dozed off.

A few days later his hands are made of wax.

— Go on, don't be afraid, kiss him — they give me a little shove.

— Kiss him on his hand.

I get close and kiss him. His skin feels like it's not there: unwarm, unsoft. Nobody lives underneath. A candy wrapper I'm allowed to keep. I'd take it out and smell it, and the candy would come back, one after another, as if they were real. The grandpa wrapper needs to be buried. But you can keep something as a memento.

— Take what you want.

I want a sweater.

— It's all sweaty, are you sure you want that rag?

Washed off grandpa, the sweater hangs on a line. Still wet, the sweater is ironed off the grandpa. I don't want that sweater, not any more.

Not asking for permission, I take the comb. Not asking, so I'm stealing but I'm not ashamed. It still has grandpa. I take you, comb, to be my memento.

A NEEDLE CUSHION

A child is worried because it can't feed a stone. Not because it doesn't know where its mouth is. It knows — it's all mouth. It doesn't know what to give it so it would eat.

It goes to the kitchen to ask for a chipped saucer from which a cat drank. It pulls at the apron once, twice, that's how it knocks at the mother's attention. It's open — for a moment sliced out of minced meat. The child points to the saucer, its entire body is asking.

— Take it.

Mother goes back to beating the knife into the cutting board. The beat is in two.

— Don't cut yourself.

It does so before it gets to the doorway. It presses its thumb too tightly to the glass dent. It collected some blood in the feline saucer.

Now it carries the stone. Aside from a chick, it never carried anything so gingerly. It squats and puts it on the edge of the saucer. It gives it a little nudge, as if it were a blind animal, to direct it to the blood. It rolls and stiffens. It won't touch it.

The child asks for a cushion. The one that belonged to the needles but now it's nobody's, old and prickled. At night, when there's darkness, it puts the stone on top of it. It gives it crust. It lays itself next to it. And waits.

The white by the crust — the bread's flesh — is the only thing that gives light. The child knows, somehow it knows, that the night is heavy and makes every object a little heavier: the coal in the bucket, a button, thread and eyelid. The night has makeweights. The crust keeps on shining, untouched.

The child can't sleep. It's afraid that it won't know when the stone has died. That it will carry a dead stone, talk to a dead stone and lie in the bed with the dead. It's afraid that it will die because it won't eat.

— Mom.

You can't wake up mother when the night is putting weights on her.

POCKETS

One day, father found hands. His own. They were put away in a coat's pockets. The right hand just a little tighter than the left.

First, he took out the right one. He did it by pulling the skin with his teeth. He dropped the hand to the floor, it hurt. He turned it on its back with his foot, and unfolded the fist into fingers. Before the first use, it should be wiped. He did it with a knee dressed in a flannel pant leg. He plucked the right hand out of the pocket together with a piece of lining it held on to. He spread it forcefully, put it on and cleaned it up.

After several days of being in place, the hands ate, drank and snapped their fingers. After a while, they felt like beating. That's when father showed them to me.

TO FEED THE STONE

Sorrow teaches me that I'm used for living.

– When you're eating – it says – your job is to remember to chew and swallow, that's all. You see, your hair grows without your help, breathing and sleeping happens on its own, your eyes know how to close. Basically, you almost don't need yourself for anything. And so when walking, I only shuffle my feet, and sitting, I press the stool which squeaks. When I'm sitting like this, the view's using me hours on end for looking.