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To the Waves

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Translated from the Norwegian by Rosie Hedger

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It's autumn, but I can't remember it ever having been summer. It's been raining for weeks. Maybe even months. But now the layer of cloud has burst and bands of sunshine slice through the air.

I stand in the garden for the last time and listen to the forest, which sings. Lean my head back and catch sight of a flock of birds flying overhead. The earth gurgles beneath the soles of my boots as I start walking. It's as if the ground is trying to restrain me. Even with the walking stick in my right hand, every step is a challenge. I totter up to the terrace, unsteady on my feet, before stopping to rest.

There's light coming from the living room window in the house that I've come to think of as my own. The large desk lamp is switched on, filling the space with a warm glow. It's almost completely empty now. The curtains have been taken down. The furniture sold. All that remains is the stack of cardboard boxes.

I place my left hand under my head and listen to the second hand on my wristwatch. It reminds me of the heartbeat of a dying animal. After a few minutes, I get up, straighten my checked boxers and run a hand across my chest. My body is still stiff and my joints are aching.

The pain spreads up my back. I take a pill from the bedside table. Grip the walking stick in one hand and limp over to the window. Draw the curtains and see the forest open out before me.

Way out in the distance, above the treetops, the morning ferry drifts in towards the city. It's strange to think that it'll soon be gone. I wonder how many times it'll travel back and forth before they open the tunnel into the city. It's just possible to make out the buildings in the distance. The clouds in the sky have contracted once again. It's just a matter of time before it starts to rain. I sense a faint rumble underfoot, followed by a gentle tremor. The first detonation of the day.

On the stool beside the bed I've laid out clothing for the day ahead. I get dressed slowly. After pulling my jumper over my head, I realise that this is the last time I'll wake up in this room.

The bare soles of my feet stick to the parquet flooring in the attic space. It smells of green soap and wet cardboard. I stand there and gaze all around me, and it's as if I'm seeing everything for the first time. All of these things I've taken for granted for so long.

In my grandmother's day, the walls were covered in paintings of ships battling through foamy white seas. Little by little, I started to make changes. Stored the old furniture in my father's barn, moved some of my own things into place, and after a while I started to feel like the house was mine. It smelled like my house when I opened the front door. I wonder how it will smell when others move in. It's strange to imagine someone else in my room, filling out forms with my address. The thought alone makes me feel nauseous. It'll be a couple of city folks, no doubt.

My brother has taken care of everything. He insisted. 'There's no need for you to interfere,' were the exact words he'd used. All I have to do is to hand over the keys to the estate agent.

I go downstairs and make a cup of coffee, which I take out onto the terrace with me. Two blackbirds take flight from the railing as I open the door. I sigh, put down the walking stick and cup of coffee, lean against the railing and light a cigarette. Hear the way the thin rolling paper burns away to nothing between my fingertips. My throat stings and I cough. The sun has just come up, and the morning dew coats the grass like pearls of sweat. The autumn air is chilly and damp.

In front of me are the five oak trees, they must be over a hundred years old. The ramshackle treehouse that Grandad built sits in one of them. Ivy has coiled its way up and around the woodwork. Thrust its green hands in through the windows and wrapped its way around the ladder so that it's barely possible to make out the individual rungs. My brother and I used to climb up there, each with our own pile of comic books in tow. We'd lie on our stomachs on an old tufted rug drinking Grandma's blackcurrant cordial from small plastic bottles and reading Silver Arrow. Dreaming of being red Indians and hunting for bison. Running through the forest with bows and arrows.

Slowly I rub my right hand over the small of my back. Let my gaze wander further out until it falls on Dad's house and the workshop. Ten minutes' walk through the forest, but the road twists and turns on lengthy detours. I close my eyes and picture the rooms in the red house. The porch with its old, leaky windows, the hallway overrun with shabby shoes and coats, the kitchen with its creaky bench that transforms into a bed, the doorframe marked with pencil strokes.

A gull screeches somewhere nearby. I open my eyes and study the brown barn out that way. The paintwork looks poorly maintained and the gutter is lopsided. I vaguely recall what it was like before Dad closed everything down. A sense of everything being in motion. Sheep that needed fetching from pasture, grass to be dried out for making hay, muck that needed spreading.

I take a last drag of my cigarette and stub it out in the ash tray. The timber house breathes down my neck and I can't bring myself to turn around and face the emptiness of its dark windows. Not yet.

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It's that time of year when the deciduous trees release their seeds. I watch them float away on the breeze and disappear. The air is filled with potential forests. I follow the trajectory of one seed on the wind, but when I hear the crunch of the gravel at the front of the house, I go back inside.

Oscar is standing in the hallway and greets me with a nod. His fair hair has thinned in the few years I've known him, but his build is as stocky as ever.

'Ready?' he asks, kicking off his work boots.

The trousers of his worn, blue overalls sweep the floor on his way into the living room. I make my way into the kitchen by way of response and put on another pot of coffee. Run the palm of my hand along the kitchen worktop. Play for time before carrying two steaming mugs into the living room.

'Thanks,' Oscar says, taking a sip and setting the mug down on a cardboard box. He wanders around the room, restless.

'Shit,' he mutters under his breath.

I take a sip of my coffee.

'My God,' he continues, looking over at me as if waiting for an answer.

'Thought he might change his mind, am I right?' he asks, before adding, 'I just can't get my head around the fact that your own brother could do this to you.'

'Him, yeah,' I say.

'Yeah, him.'

'I've given up trying to understand him.'

Oscar sits on one of the cardboard boxes and rolls himself a cigarette.

'You can't just give up,' he says.

'You don't know Sigbjørn,' I say, and realise that Oscar has never actually met my brother.

'I just don't understand how it can be possible, I mean, is it even legal?'

'He's the one with the allodial right.'

'But what kind of person makes their own brother homeless? Who does something so bloody awful?' he asks, mumbling to himself.

I walk over to the window and pretend to be looking at something outside, but I've seen everything before.

'I can't understand why you aren't up in arms about all this, Zahl,' he adds.

I don't turn around, just stand where I am and look out at the forest. Look for a bird I can follow as it soars on the breeze, but find none.

'You know what they say, Oscar. When you're up to your neck in shit, don't go hanging your head.'

*

A while later, we turn into Dad's drive and reverse the lorry up to the steps. Dad stands at the front door and gazes at the boxes as we pass him by. He's wearing his brown hunting trousers, the same pair that haven't been out on a hunt since the end of the 1990s, and a well-worn, red, checked flannel shirt with a notebook sticking out of the left chest pocket.

We place the boxes upstairs in my childhood bedroom. After the accident, I moved into the guest room downstairs, and up here it feels as if time has stood still. The walls are blue, the door and window frames yellow. The Swedish room.

The old football posters are a little faded, but otherwise it's only the smell that's changed. The faint odour of dust and dead air. This is just for the time being, I tell myself, placing a box down by the bed. My t-shirt is sticking to my back, and I can feel the sweat running down my forehead. The window catch is stiff, and just as I manage to shove it open, I knock over a plastic cup on the desk filled with pens. Irritated, I pull open the top drawer and shove the pens inside on top of an old brochure from the air force.

I hear Oscar's heavy footsteps on the stairs.

'That was the last of them,' he says, putting down a box. He leans against the door and scratches his moustache.

We've done several trips now, filling the room and the garage, but today we moved the final items. No more excuses to return. We step out into the hallway and I close the door behind us.

Dad is sitting on the bench in the kitchen, hunched over the table and supping at a cup of coffee. Beside his cup is the dictionary, a magnifying glass and the week's crossword.

'That's that, then' he says, looking up at us.

'That's that,' I reply.

Dad plucks a sugar cube from the bowl and dips it in his coffee. The slurping sound fills the silence of the room. I find two cups, take the lid off the well-used thermos and fill each in turn. Oscar lights a cigarette and sits there, rolling it between his fingertips as he stares blankly into the distance. He takes a drag, drawing the smoke deep down into his lungs, then exhales.

'Think you're looking a bit tired,' he says, nodding at Dad.

I cast a warning glance in his direction, but he shakes it off.

'Is that crossword taking it out of you?' he asks, taking another drag.

'Something like that,' Dad says, chuckling amiably.

'I'll head over one last time after this,' I tell them, fishing my own packet of cigarettes from my pocket.

Nobody says a word.

'Need to pick up the last few bits and pieces,' I add, even though we all know that's not true.

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The car emits a slight groan as I turn the key in the engine. This is just for the time being, I tell myself again, switching on the radio. After a few metres the gravel turns to tarmac, and I drive out onto the main road. The trees around me blend into one another, transforming into a hazy, green backdrop. I drive slowly, looking out of the window as I pass Per's farm. He's out in the fields in his old tractor. Shortly afterwards I reach the area where Anders Haugen lived. Everything is secured behind high metal fences. The house and barn are gone, and the cultivated land has been replaced with two gaping craters in the rock. A large, yellow crane looms over the mounds.

I trundle slowly past the building site. A digger opens its metal jaws and eats away at the earth. The area is filled with bulldozers and steamrollers. A cold, yellow light gleams from the two holes resembling eyes in the rock face. Two empty lorries roll into place in front of the diggers. They excavate in different directions, scooping out all that lies beneath us, and from time to time I find myself wondering whether the island might split in two. Heaps of earth and rock that essentially belong to us are transported away at the end of each day. I don't know where they take it all.

It is like stepping into an unfamiliar house when I get there. It already smells different. I kick off my shoes and carry on down the hallway. Carefully I make my way around the empty house that only yesterday I had considered to be my home.

‘This will soon be just a memory,’ I tell myself again before leaving and closing the front door behind me. I sit on the steps and light a cigarette. My t-shirt is still clinging to my back. The clouds in the sky grow steadily darker, the rain hanging heavy beneath them, waiting to fall. A flock of birds fly in the sky above, but they’re too high up for me to make out what kind they are. Migratory birds, no doubt. It’s that time of year. I take another drag of my cigarette and sit there, wondering how birds know where they’re supposed to fly, where it’s safe to go. A detonation warning siren fills the air. Shortly afterwards comes the explosion, and after that, the vibration of the ground beneath my feet. I take it as a hint. Get yourself out of there, the island tells me. This isn’t your home anymore.

I put out my cigarette, supporting myself with one hand on the top step as I push myself up. The feeling of the step against the palm of my hand. The rough concrete against my skin.

The combined scent of sweaty male and Little Trees air freshener lingers in the car. In the rear-view mirror I see the house grow smaller. By the time I reach the end of the gravel track, it’s nothing but a tiny dot. Then it’s gone.

Back in Dad’s driveway, all the lights in the house are off. He always goes to bed before ten. The circadian rhythm of the farmer. So laborious in those first few years, but eventually it becomes a part of you. It’s become a part of him, refusing to let go even now that he’s retired.

It’s quiet in the house. I notice upstairs that my brother’s bedroom door is ajar. I haven’t been in there since he moved. I’ve no intention of going in there now.

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I wake abruptly to the sound of the doorbell. Look at the clock. Past twelve? I never sleep this late. The doorbell goes again and I get up, take a pill, pull on some clothes and make my way downstairs.

Outside the front door is a man, clearly vexed. The type who’s always pressed for time. They all look the same in their tailored suits and pointed toe lace-up shoes, a leather briefcase dangling from one hand.

‘Ah, finally some signs of life,’ he says bluntly, offering me a hand. ‘Nils Olavsens.’

I take his hand and squeeze it cautiously.

‘You must be Zahl?’ he says, removing his hand from my grasp.

For a moment I stand there like an idiot, my arm still outstretched before me.

‘I’m here to collect the keys,’ he says.

‘Keys?’ I repeat, finally letting my hand fall. The porch is cold, and the chill from the tiles underfoot seeps through my wool socks. I shudder.

‘To the house. Would you mind fetching them? I need to catch the ferry back to the city,’ he says.

I take my time tracking them down. Perhaps he’ll change his mind and leave if I move slowly enough. Get so bored that he’ll just tell me to keep them, that there’s no need for me to move out after all.

‘Can you find them?’ he asks.

‘They’re here somewhere,’ I reply, looking down at the keys in the drawer in front of me.

‘Could you hurry up, please?’

I give up, grab the keys and hand them over.

‘Thank you,’ he says, irritated, quickly returning to his car and heading back out onto the road. I leave the door open as I pull on my clogs. The air is clear and cool, and I shiver as I cross the driveway and make my way towards the workshop.

The warmth hits me. I step inside and close the door quickly behind me, taking a seat in the armchair by the window. Light a cigarette and glance at the overflowing ashtray on top of the cabinet. Feel at once just how my shoulders relax. I take a long drag and lean back. Rest my hand on the

armrest. The leather is dry and cracked in places. I exhale the smoke and it rises up to the rafters, towards the branches I found in the forest after storms.

Birds throng together up there, as if perched on a high-voltage power line. Lapwings, dunnocks, chaffinches, blackbirds, wheatears, swallows, white wagtails and chiffchaffs. Some are more carefully crafted than others. The first couple didn't turn out quite so well, they look a little unnatural. But they're all sitting up there. It's rare that I sell small birds. People want ptarmigans, peacocks, capercaillies, more flamboyant species. But they don't interest me. In a way, I understand the fascination for the unusual, those things that one doesn't often see, but I have more of a taste for the beauty to be found in the everyday.

Over the course of the past few years, I've lost count of the number of stuffed birds and animals in my possession. That's in addition to those that Dad's made. He kept everything he never managed to sell. His customers were mostly neighbours and acquaintances looking for hunting trophies to hang in their cabins, but he also did smaller jobs, different birds and small animals that he sold for a low price. Sales were relatively poor, unfortunately, and the house has become a museum of dead animals.

When I was young, I used to dream that all of the creatures came to life at night and roamed around the house. The elk heads hanging on the wall followed me with their gaze. The stoat stole under the sofa while the eagle owl flapped its wings and flew from one curtain rail to the next.

In the years after the accident, I served as Dad's apprentice. It was a trade. Something I could become good at. Dad spent hours showing me the various processes. How I should use my scalpel, how to dye the furs, how the animals should be positioned to best effect based on what was most natural for them. I can't call myself a taxidermist without formal training, but I know the trade. I know the art. Because it's an art to recreate movement, to imitate life.

The freezer is empty. I took the last bird out to thaw yesterday. A ptarmigan that Per from next door shot while out on a hunt this year. This is the first time I haven't had several birds in storage. I don't know what I'll do afterwards. It's not that I absolutely need to stuff birds. It's rare that I manage to sell anything, but I'm so fond of the end result. I like having a reason to get up in the morning.

The ptarmigan is lying in a plastic bag on the table in front of me. I wash my hands and put on my leather apron. The leather itself is stiff and hard, but it's become sculpted to the shape of my body. I look at the dead animal. Study the mottled brown plumage.

I take a pair of plastic gloves from a small tin on the table. I lay the ptarmigan flat on its back with its breast facing upwards and feel my way to the top of breastbone. The sharp scalpel slices through the skin and slides along the breast. Cutting as cleanly as possible, like a surgeon at work, I listen out for detonation warning alarms all the while. They've been frequent over the past few weeks, and I'm careful to lift the scalpel away in time. The slightest disturbance can cause real damage.

I pry the plumage loose from the carcass. The whole membrane needs to come with it. Carefully I lift the feathers over to the sink and fill the large zinc tub with water. I take my time, painstakingly washing the inside of the lifeless skin and feathers. Afterwards, I pat it dry with a little paper and place it inside the small spin dryer, watching the water as it trickles out through the hole in the middle.

The machine beeps and I take the plumage out and dry it with a hairdryer. Everything feels instinctive when I work. No hobbling. My fingers already know what they need to do before I have a chance to think about it. The heat from the hairdryer smooths the feathers, and little by little the plumage is transformed. It's as if I breathe life into something dead.

I pop in some rolled up tufts of wool before adding the feathers to the tumble dryer.

Just as I press the switch to start the machine, Dad knocks at the door to tell me that dinner is ready. I must have been at it for several hours. Hardly surprising that my back has seized up.

The aroma of meatballs and gravy fills the kitchen.

‘Where were you earlier?’ I ask him.

‘Popped into the city,’ he says, throwing the meatball packaging in the bin.

‘Ah,’ I reply.

We eat in silence.

‘That’s that, then,’ Dad says when his plate is clean.

‘That’s that,’ I say.