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CHIQUITITA

Translated from Norwegian

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More information on *Chiquitita* here.

It starts by the sea. There, is the sea. The day is grey, winter by the looks of it. Bitterly cold, a dampness about it, like in a cellar, under the ground. A slight wind, gusting. The reeds at the shore wave, frozen, faded. Are there reeds in winter, or does everything die? I don't know. I can't remember everything. The waves are treacherous that side of the lighthouse, the father says. You must never swim there. Do you see them, he says, but it's as if he's looking at something other than the waves, the reeds, me. The lighthouse is splendid. Freshly painted. A sign says not to deface the brickwork. A heart. An arrow. *P + EL = true*. I sit on the wall and dangle my legs. It's not much of a drop. The sand will catch me when I jump. It's a bit too far, but I'm a big girl now, I can do it. The sand is cold, it too damp. In the distance a pack of stray dogs – thin as partition walls, I think to myself *later later later* when replaying the scene in my mind's eye. But it's not really a scene. Just rows of things, crumbs on a plastic table in the kitchen of the grandmother's house. Red tiles. Meaningless things, replaceable things. And yet, to me. That exact wall. That exact door handle. The exact sound made by the man on that big tricycle with the freezer box strapped to the handlebars, calling out to tell us he has ice cream for sale.

This is how you gather. One thing leads to another. Then a rockslide. But before that, very slowly, it builds into a mountain. A mountain of crumbs and dogs, reeds and tricycles, and the father standing with his back turned, talking to me as if talking to himself. The grandmother's white hands. Roasted corn in the pocket of an apron. This thing about when I was a child.

An ordinary child at first, who is given a name, it's the mother who pushes for it: *Marisol.* After the Virgin. And the sun. Both of those things. The father wants me to be called something else, to be named after a woman of the revolution, but it's not that important to him, he backs down, and the mother decides on Marisol. She pats

her belly and speaks to me from her world. I don't remember this, but I've been told I once said that I did. That I claimed to have felt, remembered, a thud, as when a car bumps its front end gently against a gate.

Once, I fell into a river. The water was grey and gluey. I don't know how long I stayed under. When I came up, the father was standing by a tree looking at me. I've dreamt a lot about that tree. They put me in some dry clothes they borrowed. Too big for me, no doubt. The mother yelled at me in a fit, her voice probing, accusing, desperate all at once. She'd have been frightened. She shouts when she's frightened. I saw yellow fish in the water. They passed backwards and forwards in front of my eyes, as if they wished to say: What's this girl doing here, she's not meant to be here. The grown-ups laughed. *There are no fish in the rivers, only in the sea*, the mother said, or perhaps the father. I felt ashamed when they laughed. I had no way of knowing that what I'd seen didn't exist. No one had taught me that.

That night, I dreamt about a garden. An intricate garden, dense and dark, like a Renaissance painting. I floated by a crooked tree, it was old and rugged. Everything around me was green, as if with mould. The sky was filled with heavy, rolling clouds, leaden. In the dream I thought, *Now God's going to appear, now you're going to see God.* The mother woke me. The bed was wet and I curled up, curled up my voice too.

I wet the bed at nights. My bed is yellow, as the mother's face is yellow, and my room, the walls, for all time. How can that be? I can't sleep afterwards, after I've been dried and the mother has torn open a bin bag, spread it out on top of the mattress and tucked me under a blanket she's fetched from the living room. Don't tell me you pissed on the pillow too, she says.

The mother is also a daughter, one of several. They are my aunts. There are brothers as well, sons, they're called the uncles. I'm the first child, the daughter. I'm named after the Virgin and the sun. No one ever wet the bed until me. I can't sleep at night, I'm afraid of wee. But in the daytime I shine like a sun, the mother says. She clothes me in dresses I love. She holds my hand when we go into the grandmother's house, where I may sleep, eat, talk with the aunts and the uncles, where I can be the niece, the very first child.

Everything I do is new. The winter sun is yellow like the stains in my bed. How can that be? The grown-ups teach me the names of birds, gods, they touch my hair and call me their pearl, sweet pearl, daughter, occasionally their jewel, sun, my sun, and sweeheart too. But I want to be called mist.

No, that's later. Much later. My name is Marisol. *Later* means all that hasn't happened yet, but which will happen. *Later*, I tell myself when I'm alone in a corner, behind a curtain with a doll that's been left lying. *Later later later*, a refrain. A sentence I utter with shame, certain that it isn't mine, not really. This I tell: I am only properly alive by the river near the grandmother's house, where I wash a wedge of apple, over and over. *Like a raccoon*, a man says to me. Hardly more than a boy. For a long time, I ignore him. I do not reply when he speaks to me. I don't know what he wants. But he's the sort who won't give up, who looks at me as if through a crack, who stands on the fringes, and waits for me. We meet at parties, occasionally. I avoid him. I don't know why. But then. He becomes my first love, the first real one. We're nearly adults by then, *later later later*, when I mention the river to him, the wedge of apple, the washing of it, my life.

I'm so often ashamed that I forget it's shame that I feel. God doesn't appear in my dream and I'm ashamed for believing He would. I'm ashamed about the yellow fish I saw, about the river I fell into, about my wet clothes, and the dry ones someone had to lend me. I laugh at myself when the grown-ups laugh, and I'm ashamed for doing so. The mother is stern. There's a responsibility, and the responsibility is mine. Her furrowed brow, even though she is young and radiant. I've ruined the family outing. The mother was frightened, presumably, frightened that I would drown, that I would be pulled out of the river, drowned. She ran around, calling my name out, restrained at first, uncertain, as if she didn't actually believe that what had happened had happened. Her voice grew harsher. I could hear it in the water. Slow, slower then than when she swept me up and half embraced, half slapped me. The rest of the afternoon the grown-ups eat big chunks of meat with their hands. Relief, that it ended so happily. The mother wears sunglasses and prefers not to look at me, is more interested in her cousin, the amusing aunt I don't like, which I'm ashamed about. When the chill comes, I must borrow more clothes. The eucalyptus trees sway, like heads listening to music. I need a wee, but must keep it in. I don't know why, and am ashamed for not knowing. I'm cold all the time. She's cold all the time, the mother says.

And then there's the doctor who wants to examine between my legs. He comes into my room. It's so light outside. He approaches softly, calls me a name I've never heard before, meaning *champion*, a female champion, a girl champion. He says it won't hurt, what we're going to do. The mother and father will watch. A face can be like a moon. Two moons, three. I tense up. I try to look at the mother, at the father, but there's no one there. Only my crotch, and moons. Moons have no eyes, only flat, furrowed whatever. They encourage me to relax. They try to be funny, chirpy, they say crack, cleft, wee, and their faces grow as sharp as flick knives, scythes. I think of driftwood, of hard, wet, smooth planks, odds and ends full of splinters. The doctor's face, as he leans close, is specked with tiny black dots. *Girl champion?* What does that mean? What do I have to do?

Later later later. Many faces too close. Tongues at the periphery of my own, determined and independent. Many voices that call out to me, whisper, beckon to me from dismal, quivering crannies.

I don't know why I finally tell the boy about this, the one I ignore for so long. It must all sound so meaningless to him. A small raccoon with a serious face. Is he right? Am I hoping to escape a world in which, inadvertently, I have ended up? You're a grown-up who's obsessed with the past, he says. He says so with kindness, he wants to understand, understand me. I remember him. He's standing in front of a painting in a big city. We're on holiday together, youngsters in love. We've just had sex in the hot room in the guesthouse where we're staying. Yes, I say. But I'm also a child who's obsessed with the future, a raccoon who one day will drop her wedge of apple and take off. But how?

I want to be called mist, because the mist embraces me and makes me invisible. I suppose that's what I think a name should do. I hear my own, all the time. I am the first child. Everyone loves the first child. No one has seen a child walk before. No one has heard a child speak before. All words are new, fresh. Apple. Wedge. Virgin. Child. The sun is yellow as my crotch is yellow, as my name is. The mist does not lift, and that is good.

It's winter. I've been driven over to the grandmother. The nights are bitterly cold, it's an old, dilapidated house. The mother has brought a small suitcase with my things in it. Crayons, patent leather shoes, some bin bags. The father, in the background, the slab of his back, thin and sinewy, like a fine, narrow door. They give me thick socks to put on. Woollen underwear. Woollen tights. Camamile tea at breakfast, camamile tea before bed. I wonder what good all this is to him, the boy. Can't we look at the paintings instead? Yes, he says. Does he feel shame? I hope he does, I guess. Why? Because, *raccoon*. Because, *later*. Because I listen with a speared globe for an eye. And because the apple wedge is not sad in itself, I must become a sad mist, a speared crotch, a non-eye.

Flick knives. Moons and mist. I've asked the grandmother if I may stand in the doorway and watch the sky, she's said it might rain, and it hardly ever happens. I see a boy come limping along the street, I think at first he's pretending, fooling around, so strangely he approaches. When he's closer, I notice that his mouth hangs open. He is surprised, ashamed. His calf is torn open, his denim trouser leg too, and it looks as if a gigantic fountain pen has leaked all over his leg. It's a lot of blood. I see a bone, bluish white, shrieking, smeared. The boy presses his cries back into his open mouth, swallows them almost, and lifts his face to see if anyone saw him. But no one leans from any window, no one stands sweeping on the pavement, no one stands in any doorway to call in any child from the street. And the mad dog is nowhere to be seen either. It must have run on, in the direction of the river. But I see the boy. I see the bone. And then I see the dog too, down on the riverbank. Its gape, like a sea rose.

I look after a goat that's tethered at the rear of the house, near the hen runs and a shed for tools, spades. One night I hear the grandmother say something about a child that has no shoes. Everybody is poor here, in this street. But I have shoes, fine patent leather shoes, and then I want to be the poor child, so that he or she may have my shoes, and then I want to be the shoes in which the child may walk, and I cannot sleep then for wondering if shoes can sleep or if I, who am both children, can sleep without shoes, if it can even be done. I hear the grandmother's breathing in the nights. Calm at first, then blustery. Is the reason she sleeps that she does not think of bone, sea rose, shoes, child? The morning comes.

It begins with the door at which I stand and shiver, the grandmother's run-down house where I love to be, to sleep in, to dream in when the uncles have been and eaten their dinner and the aunts set and later clear the table and argue good-naturedly with

their brothers, and where I learn simple yet important things. That the grandmother is a mother too, and that the aunts are daughters, the uncles sons, that milk may form a skin, which I don't like, that the barrel of water where we wash is dangerous for a child to fall into, that the water is occasionally cold, and then I think of lead, of flick knives, because the things by which I am surrounded may be interpreted in many ways, they are mysterious and mute, but not insignificant. I learn that the mother's smile cannot be trusted, that the aunt who is also the mother's best friend is an amusing cousin too, that one of the uncles is small in stature, yet in other, inexplicable ways enormous, as if he becomes a beating heart, a grumbling truck when he looks at me and lifts me up and teaches me the makes of all the cars that go by, teaches me to ride a bike without stabilisers, to draw superheroes. Doesn't he know I'm a girl?

Every day I discover new things. As if all the components of the world have been waiting patiently for me and only now make themselves manifest, cautiously, affectionately, so as not to overwhelm me. Little by little I hear the whisper of things. A dressing of dust on a skirting board, a spider swaying back and forth in its web, the shape of a table leg, and the worn-down sole of a shoe belonging to one of the grandmother's friends, a black-clad woman with brown tights who smells of dust and wooden floors. I find a coin. It is green, no, greened. I am lifted up to the counter when the grandmother buys sugar and flour. Now you can see, she says. There are the shelves of candies. I extend my hand with the coin in my palm. The man says it will buy me a hard candy. I don't want to give up my coin, but it's usual for people to give up coins, it's what you're supposed to do with them. You get something else instead. I put the candy in my mouth. It's called politeness. Politeness tastes horrible, shameful. What do you say? You say thank you.

This is what the grandmother's house looks like. It has a bedroom facing the street. The beds are old and funny, odd, comical, I don't know which word is right. They've sagged in the middle like old nags, like the uncle when he lets me sit on his back and make up horse names for him. His name is *horse uncle* and I can be called *mist*, the same as a dog in a comic book is called. Only I don't want to be a dog. I want to be a horse. I hope that horses too can be called *mist*. They can, the uncle says. Everyone knows that horses can be called exactly what they want.

The room next door contains a dining table, dark and heavy, impossible for anyone to lift, not even a superhero can. The uncle who's a horse lets me dance on the table, and when the other grown-ups are visiting, I do a turn for everyone, it's what we've practised. They praise me and applaud. It's something valued, I realise, to command an audience. No one has ever before seen a child stand up and dance on a dining table, it's unthinkable, or at least highly exceptional. Only once in a blue moon will a child be deemed good enough to be allowed the opportunity. But I don't like it. It has to do with the stillness that arises when everyone is looking at me. It's as if my chest has been removed and put somewhere else, and not until afterwards do I sense how unpleasant it feels, how strange and empty. The next time they want me to perform, I say no and start to cry. *Later later later* this will be a story told by many. By then I've grown and have long since stopped crying. The mother says I'm good, now stop shivering, it's ridiculous, the heating's on.

I eat roasted maize. I eat soil when lying on the ground. I play with two yellow fish that swim slowly this way and that in a bowl on the windowsill. I am the child of one of the daughters. The grandmother's house is a small house with canvas ceilings still sagging, they look like big swollen bellies, like the old uncles have under their woollen coats. Across the street is a brothel and I make

friends with the girls who work there. I like their messed-up hair and their sunglasses, the cotton wool between their toes when they paint their toenails. I like the colour of their nail varnish and the way they yawn and drink from tall glasses of juice on the pavement in the mornings, in see-through dressing gowns. I'm see-through too. When I play with the fish, I'm swimming.

The grandmother's sons are all working. They drive trucks but are interested in all kinds of motor vehicles. Often they'll be seen bare-chested, leaning under the bonnets of cars parked outside the house, as if about to dive into the engines. They repair mopeds for the neighbourhood kids, change the gear boxes of old wrecks, lie on their backs underneath the cars so only their legs stick out in filthy, oil-smeared overalls. They wear shoes with metal toes they let me stand on, they'll dance with me then and fool around, and toss me about as if at the funfair. Often they'll bring food and money with them for the grandmother, who is their mother, and then they'll be off again, to see young women they're courting. I know when it's going to happen. They drop the bonnets down and wash themselves in a barrel, and afterwards they'll reek of scent and their hair will be smooth and black and shiny and their smiles like shrieking bones. Usually their hands are black with oil and soot and everything else the cars deposit on them. But not when they smell of scent. They change into different trousers then, lighter-coloured shirts. They don't prickle me with their stubble when they give me a squeeze.

The uncles have their own places to live. Some live with a friend. Others on their own. Some of them hardly live anywhere really but drive their trucks from place to place and sleep where they eat or with their loads. They'll just lie down for a bit with the furniture, the pig carcasses and the milk they transport. The uncles go back and forth, between here and there, and don't care much where they are, what's home and what isn't. They're as indifferent and as unaffected as palindromes.

The house is full of women. The daughters of the grandmother are poor, so they must live in small rooms behind dark curtains. Women's things are to be found strewn about the house. And scissors, combs, a globe, a warped fiddle, abandoned. Of the sisters, the mother is the jewel. She has an education. Her coats come from

the finer shops in the city centre. I am the jewel's daughter. Jewels gleam. They shine. I leaf through a book. I wish for a diamond for my birthday and everyone laughs. I laugh too. Afterwards I am ashamed, I don't consider jewels and diamonds to be especially fine, even if they do shine. Why did I wish for such a thing? If I could have done things differently, I would have wished for a dog, though I am rather afraid of dogs. But no one here cares for dogs. The uncles chase them away by throwing stones at them. On one occasion the grandmother and I happen upon a twisted carcass by the river, the belly split open, and she tells me that people sometimes lace meatballs with shards of glass so that the dogs may die on their own without people having to trouble themselves throwing stones.

The daughters of the grandmother are the sisters of the mother. They are also my aunts. Many things are many things all at once. The torn guts of the dead dog, for instance, a bitch, are something that remain with me the rest of my life. It doesn't matter that she is dead, or that she died centuries ago.

I think the aunts are grown-ups. I think everyone except me is a grown-up, but *later later later* I see their young faces, the puppy fat, their flat chests, and I hear men, boys really, on the roof at night, like cats. They come to fetch the aunts, I hear their sibilant come-hithers above the grandmother's snores. Psst. And see then the shadows of the aunts, cautious and slow-moving, as they pass through the house. The mother says she is glad to be done with such things, and embraces the stylish father who stands in the doorway with a bottle of cola in his hand. They've just delivered me to the grandmother and are about to be on their way again. They have something important to be done, so I must sleep here for some weeks. The sisters of the mother watch the father as he puts on his sunglasses and adjusts the collar of his shirt. The mother is done with nocturnal roof-climbers. A person must aspire to greater

things, she says. The father takes a swig from his bottle. The father too is a jewel. He and the mother glow in the doorway like two matchsticks, and climb into a new, green motor car.

How slow childhood is. We huddle together, we women. We join ourselves up, sleep in old and sagging beds, like sunken hulls come to rest. Everything is slow and mossy green, submarine. In the daytime we wash our clothes and linen in the barrel in which the horse uncle nearly drowned. My hands are made as red as those of the aunts by the harsh, cheap soap. It makes me proud, to be like someone else. When the horse uncle comes by with a bag of frozen chickens, I run to greet him and ask how old he was when he fell in the barrel, whether he saw any yellow fish. Oh, yes.

Time passes, but I have no real conception of what that means. I sense only a form of progression. Part of an earthen wall crumbling and dislodging. My drawings fading if left in the sun. That the shoes, now too small for me, may be given away to someone whose feet are the size mine were before, when the shoes fitted. Time is a kind of constant, a cautious displacement. As if someone were standing somewhere nudging things gently along with the toe of their boot. The river behind the house breaks its banks when it rains. The street will be filled with water and will look like the river. I learn to fold paper boats. I help with the food and wear a sea-blue apron handed down from one of the aunts. I stand on a stool next to the grandmother and watch the chickens be chopped up with a little axe. I can hardly bring myself to eat, but cannot explain why. I'm allowed to stand in the doorway and watch the falling raindrops. I talk to the sky, inside my head. It replies, but what it says is so strange that I don't know if it's being serious or whether I'm too stupid to understand. Water, paper boats, axe and a bleeding boy and chickens. Bone. Palindrome. Sea rose and the stalks of the fangs.

The weeks have passed. They come and collect me. The mother is wearing sunglasses and a fine coat. The father stands in the background and waves to me from the new, green car. I'm going home to where I actually live, and there I must behave properly. What's acceptable here will have to be different there. It's not that hard, the mother says. Or does she? Perhaps it's something I learn on my own. But how can it be?

The car smells nice. We drive through the busy city-centre streets, the father pulls in and winds the window down to greet some acquaintances. All I see are open mouths, the mother freshening her red lipstick and looking at herself in a little mirror on a flap in front of the windscreen while saying funny things that make the father's acquaintances laugh. The father lights a cigarette and the acquaintances look at me on the back seat and say, *Is this the princess?* as if expecting me to do something, say something, only I don't know what and so I look away. The mother turns round and tells me to wind my window down. The air is cold and sharp and I must smile and laugh for the father's acquaintances. I am the jewel's daughter. Gleaming like a little soldier I sit and shiver. Where do the similes come from? I ask myself *later later later*. Where does the soldier come from?

After that we drive home, to where I actually live. The mother opens the little iron gate. The house has been painted. Do you like the colour? the mother asks, and I nod. Childhood is slow. I have time to observe things and dwell on them, like the way the gate opens and closes beside the mother's body. The way the father twists round in his seat to turn the car and drive back to where he's spotted his acquaintances. When I see the similarities between one thing and another, independent life emerges. The soldier in the back seat is alive to me, because he is me too. Unfamiliar, majestic, sad.

The mother has filled the living room with green plants in big orange pots. Climbing roses, striving towards the first floor, wind themselves on wooden rods. So very delightful, the mother says. I stand a while and look at it all before being told to go upstairs to my room and wait. The mother has a surprise for me. *Later later later* I think about the structure of experience, the order in which things manifest themselves, the mother's expectation when she shows me a new, blue coat exactly like one of her own.

Don't drink so much water, the mother says. I make to gulp one last mouthful, far too much at once, and spill all over me. I'm ashamed, try to wipe myself dry, but my hands only get wet, the water runs down onto the chair, down the chair leg to the floor where it forms a small puddle beneath my dangling feet, and dinner is thereby spoiled. But I like water. All water. The water that runs, agitated and yet so smoothly, in the river behind the grandmother's house. The gritty, muddy water when it breaks its banks. The water that spurts from an old, green tap. The water in the barrel where we wash, that looks like a black eye. The rain I wait for, the impenetrable sky, the clouds, which are only air, the mother says, nothing to care about, not really. One night it thunders and I am certain the sound comes from the clouds. Afterwards it rains and I get up and look out of the window. Here, no water runs in the street. No children fold paper boats. No river here breaks its banks to make a new river. I shiver. Wee is water too. Yellowed water. There is something about what comes from between the legs that prickles and itches, when the mother wakes because I shiver in my wet bed and must call for attention. Her body, stiff and heavy, emits her grunting sounds. So unlike the daylight mother she also is, who is light on her feet, fine and glowing. At nighttime the mother needs to sleep, but I am wet and cold and she shoves me aside with one hand, the other holds the bin bag ready.

But where is the father? I wondered so many times, *later later later*. He comes home sniggering and smelling of unfamiliar scent in the early mornings. The mother doesn't care that I am woken by the racket she and he make. Perhaps it does not even cross her mind. She asks about the scent, but the father merely snorts, *What scent? I can't smell a thing*. I sneak to their bedroom door, stand and peer through the crack, the rest of my life, it feels like. That's what I say to the boy as we stand looking at a painting, in a museum, in a big city. We're almost adult and have need to tell someone about the

time when we were children. That's what he says. It's all we've got. All we can offer each other.

I *offer* the mother. Lift her up for the boy, my boyfriend, to see, as if I'd been carrying her carefully in the palms of my hands so that I might show her to him, a small, beautiful figurine of the young mother, the scene as it played out through a crack in the past, a crack in the door of the house where I actually lived as a child. I catch only a glimpse of her face. A hideous face, as if somehow it has collapsed, like a skin-coloured mask that has lost its every contour and fallen in on itself. She snatches up the alarm clock from the bedside table. It is pale blue, round, and stands on two silvery legs, making it look like a fat little boy. The father stands grinning against the wall. The grinning, sniggering father who must duck when the mother hurls the alarm clock at him, and who no longer sniggers or says anything at all when it crashes against the wall behind him and leaves a dent that remains there for ever.

But wasn't there a curfew? the boy asks as we stand and look at the painting. Was the father allowed out at night? It's a timely question. I understand it. And at the same time I don't. Not yet, I say. *Not yet*.

It's cold. I shiver so terribly. In a dream I stand barefoot at the riverbank and cast out my net. In it I catch many yellow fish. The water is filmy and soft when I immerse myself, when I cross the surface like an arrow. Perhaps I wet myself because I dream about rivers, because the yellow fish find their way out from between my legs. I am a stranger to myself, always at night. I wake, open my eyes, but believe not in what I see. My dreams are deceitful, silly. Sometimes I am a big, white gentleman made of foam. Other times a sort of goddess of the sea, because I nearly always dream about water. Sea goddesses don't exist, the mother says with annoyance when I tell her about the dream. Not everything has to be so

difficult, so cold. I understand her being annoyed with me. She must sleep. She needs to sleep. I must find something to do in my room. I pretend I'm at the grandmother's house with the aunts, that I go down to the river. I crouch on the bank. I produce a wedge of apple and proceed to wash it. I'm a raccoon, a sea goddess with the face of a gentleman, a river girl, a changeling of the water stepping out into the stream, but also into the puddles after the rain has stopped and the floods have begun to recede, when the river again has become calm and normal, and the street outside the grandmother's house is awash. Pretend river, pretend sea, a goddess's temple. Then time for dinner.

I shiver, sleep, perhaps cannot sleep. The dawn comes. I hear the mother on the telephone. The doctor who comes to examine between my legs says I behave like a master, *a girl champion*. I must undress. I shiver. I do not kick him in the face, but am then ashamed for not doing just that. The doctor returns and returns again. He's very kind, but his face is big and between my legs, as if to sniff. I'm afraid fish will come out of me. I tense my stomach. It's so cold without my tights, with no knickers. The mother smiles. The father in the background. It's as if everyone is laughing at me, at the crack. I am a drowned flower, a casing, a very brave girl, the mother says, and the father and the doctor too, but inside myself I'm all these other things.

The mother and I in blue coats in the park. The city is fine and still in winter. Near the cathedral we meet with some grown-ups and I stand looking up at them after they've said kind words about our coats. The mother tells them amusing stories about me. Many eat soil, but no one else would eat an entire earthen wall, she says, and they laugh. She tells them about the yellow fish I saw in the water, and they laugh again. I laugh too, in my blue coat, or perhaps it's my coat that laughs. Afterwards, I'm told to go and play for a while on my own. I crouch down on some grass and try to think of something. I glance towards the mother and her lady friends and understand that they're still talking about me, about me wetting the bed. The sun shines. It's as if someone has lost me.

Occasionally the mother will sing to me. The one song she knows, the one about the sky and the sea almost being the same. Both are quite as blue, from a distance it looks like they melt into each other. The mother drives the green car and I'm allowed to sit where she normally sits when it's the father driving. She's so fine, I think. Her sunglasses are flecked like the fur of a tiger, they gleam. They hide her eyes, and a good deal of her forehead, and underneath her eyes too. *Later later later*, when I've started school and am taught by the nuns and one of them lets us see a magnified image of a fly, I think of the mother in the car with her sunglasses on, on her way to the sea and the lighthouse with me. We arrive and park by a kiosk. The mother buys me an ice cream even though I'm freezing. I understand that the mother and father come here on their own, separately, when they need to think. But what do they need me for?

What's a horizon? I ask. There are several words in the song that I don't understand. The mother points at a bird of prey that soars above the waves. The horizon is a border, she says. But if you look carefully, you'll find that it's hardly there. Just like in the song. You see? Give me your hand.

Bird of prey. Border. Swimming isn't allowed this side of the lighthouse. It can be fatal. It's a grey day, bitterly cold, winter, the sand is damp as a bed in the dark. The wind gusts. The reeds wave this way and that, I think. I can't remember everything. This side of the lighthouse the waves are treacherous, the mother says. You see? But it's as if she's looking at something other than the waves, the reeds, me. The lighthouse is so splendid, it's the winter when they paint it, repair the masonry, the stairs. Can we go all the way up? I ask. I'm wondering what you can see from the top of the round tower. If the waves are any less treacherous. No, the mother says. Another day, perhaps. She couldn't be bothered going up all those stairs. A sign says not to deface the freshly painted brickwork. I see a heart with an arrow through it. *P* + *EL* = *true*. The mother says there's something she needs to do, wait here a minute. I sit on the wall and dangle my legs. The sand will catch me when I jump. I'm a big girl now, I can jump from such a height. Over there goes the mother. She has taken off her shoes and holds them in her hand. She almost never feels the cold, or else she's taking care that her nice shoes don't get dirty. Can't I come with you? I call after her, but she has turned away and I understand that I'll just have to stay put. Play, at the foot of the lighthouse. Some dogs are coming towards me, thin as partition walls, they unnerve me. Where do the similes come from? I see the mother's figure grow very small, as she nears the water's edge. I see another woman come walking along the shore, from the treacherous side, in the direction of the mother. A woman as thin as a pencil stroke, with wild black hair that blows in the wind. They meet, in the middle of the horizon, the mother and the woman with the wild hair. The waves break behind them, if I close one eye it's as if the foam could swallow them at any moment. And then the woman goes back the same way she came, and the mother's figure grows larger and larger still as she comes towards me with her shoes dangling from her hand. I tell her about the boy outside the

grandmother's house who was savaged by the dog, his dark trousers ripped apart, the shrieking bone, his shame. The waves are immense. They rise and swell, very slowly, crash down and are gone. Gone where? Into themselves? How can that be? There are many who drown themselves over there, the mother says, pointing. She wipes sand from her feet, puts her shoes back on. What does it take for a verb to become reflexive, I feel like asking, because it's something I'll spend the rest of my life wondering. But I keep it to myself. I don't want to pester her, and besides I'm a child. I don't know those kinds of words.

The horizon is a border. The mother goes back and forth downstairs in the house where I actually live, smoking, turning the music up and then down. She goes to bed, only soon she is up again, and waters the plants in the night. The father tries to sneak into the house. The sluggish sound of his key in the lock. The thin creak of the stairs. The crack through which I peer, all that I pick up without knowing. All that is woven together, interlaced. The stillnesses of night, the waiting, the music up and then down. The mother's and the father's voices when they think I'm asleep and cannot hear them.

My ears. Slow, they are, in the orange bed in which I sleep, in which I wee and wee again, in which I lie and shiver and listen while staring at the emerald palms of the wallpaper, the money plants and funny-looking rat's tails. On the wall by the door, a poster shows grazing horses, a few trees, bluebells. In the background a volcano, like some proud elder with eyes closed. And Jesus, the son of God, crucified above the desk where *later later later* I sit hunched over the alphabet, the slowness of writing, the slowness of reading. *Marisol.* I'm called the same as the Virgin, the mother of the son of God who hangs above me in the nights. And the sun, yellow, as if it wees on everything. In the daytime the doctor comes again to examine me. Between my legs an open slit. No one may sleep when I wee.

(pp. 9-37)