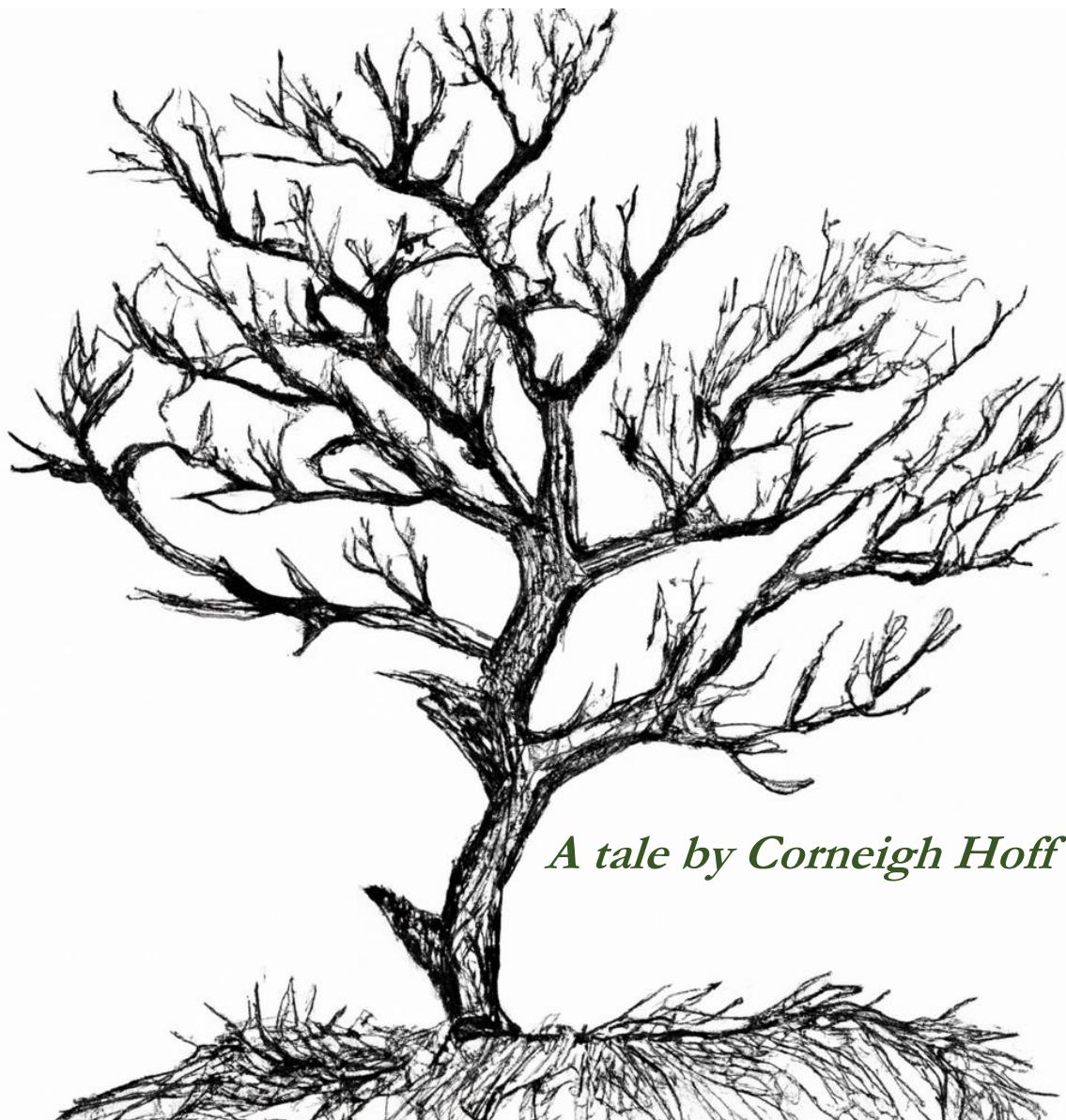


Stabat Mater



A tale by Corneigh Hoff

Prologue

I Tree

The solitary tree had numerous branches but little foliage. It stood atop a sandy mound in the centre of a field of dry, yellow grass. It seemed as though the tree was supervising and controlling the surroundings. A dozen or so yards from the tree, the field was enclosed by a forest, which formed a near-perfect circle around it.

Occasionally, there was some movement near the shrubbery that marked the forest's edge. Small or medium-sized animals would appear and swiftly dance back again into the shadows. Sometimes, one of them would venture all the way to the tree in a straight line, fast like an accurately shot arrow. After some nervous sniffing and scavenging, it would shoot back to the forest's safe shelter.

This time, the creature showing at the edge of the wood was a little bigger. It cautiously looked about and then vanished again. A few yards further on, it reappeared. Again, it looked about apprehensively, then slowly but decisively moved towards the tree.

The creature was a human, a woman, walking towards the tree, bent forward as if struggling against an imaginary storm. She was scarcely dressed. Her headscarf flapped loosely and she held up her skirt with her right hand to protect the small bundle that she kept pressed against her hip. She was small and lean, with a bony face and big, hollow dark eyes.

After reaching the tree, she unwrapped the bundle from her skirt and gently placed it in the shadow of the tree. Then she sat herself down next to the bundle, leaning against the tree. There she sat until the falling evening blurred her image and gradually made her disappear.

She was fourteen years old, yet nobody knew.

Part One

II

Town

The origin of the name *Crawlack* was not altogether clear; the local historian and bookstore owner claimed it derived from *Ville de Grand Lac* as it was supposedly entered in the Domesday book, and, according to him, *Grand Lac* was later anglicised to *Crawlack*.

All this, however, was never verified or confirmed. In the end, it did not matter much to anyone. It seemed, however, that the Norman name-givers mildly suffered from delusion of grandeur, as their *grand lac* in reality was little more than an oversized pond.

Crawlack was a small town, a regional centre, with a modestly sized police force. Including administrative staff, some eight people worked at the constabulary, which was now housed in a renovated building, the result of recent modernizations and financial injections by the government.

Detective Chief Inspector Frank Lewis had worked there since he left the academy at 19 and had worked his way up by experience and seemingly endless courses and workshops.

III

Frank

DCI Frank Lewis sat at the kitchen table with a cup of coffee, admiring his wife Liz as she bustled about fixing his breakfast and lunch for the day. Now in their mid-forties, they had been together for more than twenty years, and he still found her wonderfully attractive.

She called upstairs to their children, Mark and Lilly, to come down for breakfast. Upstairs, the kids replied by making thumping sounds.

“Anything interesting happening today?” she asked him.

“This new intern will be in. You know, the one I told you about, over thirty, looks like a teenager; pretty smart, I’m told.”

“Well, let’s hope he won’t distract you from your own work too much,” she said. “Interns are nice, but they can be a time-consuming nuisance.”

“Already got something in mind for him,” Frank answered. “I’ll put him in charge of the Musgrave case, if you can call it that. That will give me some breathing space. You remember, the young girl who drowned herself, but her mother cannot accept the idea. I do feel for mum, but she is such a nuisance... Calling the station at least five times a day. Anyway, she is all for Mr Neil Yard now.”

“That’s an interesting name,” Liz said. “Is he from Scotland?”

“Scotland? No, why?” Liz just chuckled. “Ah, I get it...you’re so funny,” he said.

IV

Case

The body of a young woman was discovered in Crawlack this morning by two early fishermen. She was identified as 23-year old student Alicia Musgrave. The police have not released any further information.

*

The two fishermen were in fact two young boys, 12 and 14 years old, who found her body face down in the mud.

*

Her death was classified as *possible accident, probable suicide*.

V

Mother

Death means pain, shock, bewilderment. It was impossible to accept that her daughter took her life.

Why? Jennifer could not believe that Alicia had just stepped out.

Their relationship had always been good and open, and Jennifer was convinced that Alicia would at least have given signals.

Mothers have an antenna for that, she told herself.

Accidental, what did that mean? How accident, why accident, where? There could never be a reason for Alicia to be even near that lake. Why?

It was almost impossible to find any person of authority who was willing to simply listen to her.

The reactions were all similar: “The reports are clear, there are no indications at all of foul play or anything like that, I understand you’re in pain, please give it time.”

After numerous calls, she had been invited to the police station just once.

There she sat down with a friendly, middle-aged officer for about half an hour, telling him what she thought but she seemed to hit a wall. A wall of kindness, of understanding and empathy, but a wall.

“You have to be patient, give yourself time,” Detective Chief Inspector Frank Lewis had said. “I understand you’re devastated,

confused. Try not to blame yourself, it was your daughter's decision, she was a grown woman and her own person. If you wish, I can get you into contact with people who might, you know, guide you through this process. I promise you, even though you will never forget, you will find a way, you will have some sort of closure. You may not think that is possible now, but you will. It just takes time."

But time did not heal.

All it did was make her pain and frustration grow. About the unwillingness to listen to her, the condescending, almost patronizing phrases, the complete lack of action. All that friendly advice, she might have accepted it if it were followed by at least some sort of investigation.

She kept calling, every day. When she got Frank Lewis on the line, he would patiently repeat what he had said before and to her plea that her daughter was just not like that, he would reply: "I know, I understand what you're saying."

After a while, Frank appeared to be not in most of the time and notes were said to be left on his desk. But her calls were never returned.

VI

Detective

One morning, at around eleven o'clock, the doorbell rang. A slim, young man, dressed much older than he looked, held out some form of identification.

"Good morning, madam, my name is Yard, Neil Yard. I'm, erm, from the police. I was hoping I might talk to you about your daughter, Alicia. Would that be possible?"

He chose his words with care, as if he had been rehearsing them on the way. He sounded as he was dressed: much older than what would match his boyish, spotty face.

My god, Jennifer thought, they're actually sending someone, hallelujah! He may be just a schoolboy, but at least they're sending someone!

"Well, how can I help you, erm, detective?" She did not try to hide a slightly contemptuous tone.

"Well, madam, I was hoping, I mean, could I have a word regarding, you know, if I could just, if it's convenient, of course..." His confidence was obviously dented.

"Oh, do come in," she said, trying to sound as motherly as possible.

When he followed her through the hall, she asked: "Mr Lewis sent you?"

"Well, yes, DCI Lewis asked me to see you."

“Please sit down, Mr Yard. I reckon you were briefed on what a pain in the neck I am...”

“DCI Lewis has done considerable research and he feels sorry there is no, well, outcome. He sent me to get some more information and keep the investigations going,” he lied.

“How long have you been working for the police, Mr Yard?”

“I graduated from the academy some ten years ago. But it’s my first day in Crawlack.”

“I see,” Jennifer said. She was surprised. *He must be older than he looks*, she thought, *unless he left the academy when he was twelve...*

“Coffee, tea?” she asked.

“Coffee, please.”

“There was never a Mr Musgrave?” Neil asked after Jennifer had returned with his coffee. She glanced at him with an almost offended look. “My husband died eight years ago,” she said.

“Oh, no, I am sorry,” he stammered, “no, I was just wondering, no, I didn’t mean that really, I was just wondering, you know, because Alicia’s last name was Musgrave, just like yours, if she had ever been married...but then it wouldn’t have been a Mr Musgrave, of course. I’m sorry.”

“Ah, I see what you mean now,” she answered. “Well, Alicia did have boyfriends I imagine. She didn’t tell me much about those things. I think in her circle relationships were a little loose.”

She told him that she had Alicia cremated, just like her husband, the same undertaker, the same contact person.

Some of Alicia's acquaintances or friends had attended the service, people Jennifer didn't know. A tall man, Bradley something, and a blonde lady called Ida, she remembered. That was it. Alicia never had many friends.

No one of the police showed up.

She had left the urn with the crematory. To have it on the mantelpiece was not her thing, and scatter her ashes, where? Over that stupid pond?

She had a memorial spot in the backyard. Nothing with flowers, just a spot. That's where she remembered her husband and Alicia.

Her voice had become milder, calmer, and less unfriendly, and Neil began to feel a little more confident.

“That’s nice,” he said, and inadvertently glanced at the window.

A few minutes later they found themselves in the small garden, near some shrubbery in a corner. With a shawl loosely draped around her shoulders, she stood next to him with her head down.

“About here.” They just stood there, in silence. She looked fragile and small.

VII

Friends and stories

The university administrator had been very helpful in giving Neil the names and addresses of some of Alicia's fellow students: Kevin Bayles, Elspeth Baran, Bradley French, Ricky Galsworthy, Ida Williams, Andrea Wolf. A good start, he thought.

*

Ida Williams had become what so many literature students became: an English teacher at a country secondary school that was so close to Crawlack that Neil rode his bicycle to get there.

“We were a pretty close group at the time. Much reading, discussing books, writing... well, not me, really, but Bradley French did, and Alicia. Mostly poetry, I believe. She would read some to us occasionally. Pretty, but a bit sad. I had the feeling there was something going on between Bradley and Alicia.”

*

“Why, it was a suicide, wasn't it?” Bradley asked. “At least that's what the papers said. Terrible thing.”

Bradley French still lived in the city and worked at a publishing house.

“Either that, or a tragic accident, that's the idea,” Neil had said, “but we promised her mum to sort some things out. It's important for her to know what her daughter has been experiencing during those final days, you know.”

“She and I got along pretty alright,” Bradley said. “We were both writers, of a sort, so that's something we talked about.”

“Ida Williams thought something was going on between you and Alicia,” said Neil.

“I see, you spoke to Ida. What is she up to?”

“She works at a school, teaching English.”

“Ah, that figures. Well, something going on, something going on... we went out to dinner once, that was it. Nice girl but not quite my type, a little bit too serious, sombre, almost.”

“I'd rather think there was something going on between her and Ricky Galsworthy. In a negative sense. She clearly hated him. Now he was a jerk, I admit. Everybody had to know he was related to the great John Galsworthy. Don't know if that's true or not. Couldn't care less.”

“There was a hell of a row between those two once. She said she got strange messages in her mailbox or something, inappropriate videos that popped up and vanished again. She thought Galsworthy was behind that. Quite a thing: bastard here, arsehole there...!”

*

“Jeez, dead? Alicia Musgrave?”

Ricky Galsworty seemed genuinely surprised. “That little viper? When, you said? I have been abroad for a while.”

“She was a bit, you know, odd. Well, not a bit, she was very odd. She thought I sent her videos. Outraged, she was. Raving and ranting in front of everybody.”

“What kind of videos, I don't know. Must have been dirty stuff she got. But not from me! Had the nerve to call me once in the middle of the night.”

“*You must stop it now, you must stop it now!*” “Completely mad.”

“No, you must stop,” I told her. “Where are those videos that I sent you, show them!”

“But then they had suddenly mysteriously disappeared. Completely off her rockers, she was. But dead... Jeez. Suicide, you believe? You don't think that's because of what went on between her and me...? Now that would be a rotten idea.”

*

Neil wondered why this altercation between Ricky and Alicia had not been mentioned by Ida Williams. When he called her, she remembered.

“Oh, yes. Ricky Galsworthy. Arrogant brat. Yes, she fell out with him a couple of times. He sent her videos or something like that. She didn't like it. No idea what kind of videos, she never showed me. I never really asked. Must have been something filthy, that would have been just like him.”

“And those videos, were they sent to her phone, or her computer?”

“To her computer, I guess. One of those tiny laptops. We all had one, easy to carry. Alicia had one too, of course. Used it for her

writing as well. The brand? No idea. Korean or Japanese, aren't they all?"

"Now that I come to think of it, perhaps Elspeth knows more, Elspeth Baran, Alicia used to hang out with her sometime. That's all I can think of."

"Her whereabouts? No, I really wouldn't know. Her father owned a bookstore somewhere in the city. I remember, because that's how she got to love books, she told us."

*

Tracking down Elspeth Baran had been quite easy. Baran's Books was prominently on the internet, phone number and all.

After her studies, Elspeth had returned to the city and got a job in her father's store. Neil had arranged to meet her.

The store was in the city centre. Near the door, an employee was stacking some books away, and Neil asked her where he could find Elspeth. The young woman immediately got up, reached out her hand, and said cheerfully: "I am Elspeth! And you're Mr Yard."

"Neil will do," he said.

"Come, let's have some coffee somewhere. Easier to talk."

"Dad!" she yelled into the store. "Be out for a minute!"

From behind the counter, an older, grey gentleman raised his hand in approval. "See you later!"

"Alicia Musgrave, oh yes!" Elspeth said after they had ordered coffee. "I heard she passed. How come, then?"

Neil told her what had probably happened.

“That poor girl! But she did have a heavy heart, that one.”

In short, Neil told her what he had agreed with Alicia's mother. “We try to give her some support, something of a closure. We want to leave her an image, a picture of who her daughter has been, those last few years. That's why I have been asking questions, here and there.”

“Well, she was a bit paranoid. Silly.” Elspeth said. “She said someone sent her things, disturbing messages. No, nothing sexual or the like. Pictures and videos of dry landscapes, wars, starving people, undernourished children, dying babies, what have you.”

“She could never show me any, because she said they vanished as quickly as they appeared. *'Message deleted'*, it read. She had hundreds of those.”

“She said somebody of our group had special software to do this.”

“Did she say who this somebody was?” Neil asked.

“Yes, Ricky. Ricky Galsworthy was his name. She said he had bothered her in other ways too. But that's what he did to everybody, especially after he had a few drinks. Ricky was a bit of a nuisance.”

VIII

Jennifer

A few days later, Neil visited Jennifer again.

“I spoke to some of Alicia’s classmates,” he said.

“This Bradley and Ida you mentioned. But also a few others. Did you know that Alicia wrote poems?”

“Oh, yes,” Jennifer said. “Even as a young child. Always reading and writing small poems. Uncles, aunts, cousins, everybody got a poem for their birthdays. But I wasn’t aware she still did.”

“Her fellow students were quite impressed with her poetry,” said Neil. “And that means something, all being linguistic students.”

Pleased, Jennifer poured him another cup of coffee; she felt taken seriously by Neil’s efforts.

“Do you know anything about a laptop computer Alicia had?” he asked.

“No idea, I’ve never seen it, but yes, she must have had one. As a student you can’t do without it, I would think...”

IX

Laptop

“Now, how am I supposed to know?” Frank sounded impatient and a bit annoyed on the phone. “Some guys of forensics went through her room, and yes, probably there was something like a computer there, I assume it was given to mum.”

“Oh, she doesn’t have it. Well, it’s not here, I’m sure. I’d have known. Her file is just a few scraps of paper, I imagine, death certificate, some notes, that’s all. Nothing like one of those big cardboard boxes with evidence and stuff. As I said, it’s never been a case.”

*

Benny was in charge of archives.

“Musgrave, Musgrave...not immediately. Must be in the *Finished* section. Couple of months ago, you say?”

Benny disappeared between the cabinets. After a few minutes he reappeared.

“Got it. Folder is heavier than usual. Has a little laptop hiding in it.”

“Can I have it?” Neil asked.

“The whole thing? Sign for it, will you.”

X

Evocative power

The mind is a treasure box; to Neil, it had always been like that.

Filled with pictures, words, images, fantasies. Stories washed ashore and deposited like sediment on his mental coast by untiring tidal waves.

All was new, all was his.

From the moment he could talk, he told stories, hovering around him like a sweet perfume. Every flower, tree, and rock told a story. Every word evoked an image. He felt rich and happy.

His parents loved this little vivid, cheerful boy, but they both died in a car crash when he was six.

His aunt and uncle took over, with just as much love, but it felt different.

By the time he was fifteen, he had grown into a somewhat shy, insecure boy. He was smaller than other boys of his age, and his childlike appearance caused him to be laughed at and teased.

But the stories, they had always been there, embedded silently in his mind.

*

Of course, the battery was dead, but that was easily remedied.

When Neil opened the small laptop, there was a welcoming tinkle when it lit up. Even when he was prompted for a password, he did not lose much time. The third attempt was successful: *Jennifer*.

Alicia's computer was organized in just a few folders. All appeared to be empty, as if someone, probably Alicia herself, had made an effort to clean up. But one folder, ironically named *Deleted*, had not been emptied.

When Neil opened it, he saw it was divided into a dozen or so subfolders, all numbered and titled. Neil opened the first one, *01 Sibye*. It contained just one short poem.

But when he read it, the few words translated into images of an unexpected vividness.

*

“Your daughter was a remarkable person,” Neil said.

They sat at Jennifer's small living room table. Neil placed a small laptop computer in front of them. Jennifer looked down, almost timidly.

“And she must have loved you very much. Her computer password was your name...” He laid his hand on hers.

*

“All I found in her computer was a dozen or so poems, some quite short, some longer. That doesn't seem much, but they're very powerful. I believe they tell a story and I think I have it in me to, sort of, reconstruct the story. I've had that since I was a child...”

His hand was still on hers. “Thank you,” Jennifer whispered.

“I believe there was an ache in her that grew stronger and stronger,” Neil continued, “whether there have ever been real images or videos, I can’t know. I don’t see how Ricky Galsworthy can be blamed for anything. Alicia’s story is here.”

Jennifer looked up at him with teary eyes. “Please, let’s go”, she said. “Show me.”

Part Two

XI

01 Sibye

*I named you
how can I love the unnamed
if you must live, live with me
then you are Sibye*

*

Sibye did not know if she was happy or not. She did not know how she could know. She was not aware that happiness, or unhappiness, existed. There were the days, the evenings, the nights. And new days, evenings, nights.

Pleased, she could be pleased.

Fetching water with other boys and girls, listening to the incessant chatting and joking on the way, that would please her very much.

Perhaps she was happy after all?

Or, at mealtimes. Then they would squat in a ring, she and her brother and nieces and nephews. And her mum filled small bowls with whatever they had.

There was smacking and laughing and giggling, and her mother was sweet.

Sometimes a man would join, sometimes another, always kind.

Yes, she was pleased then.

Thirteen years old, she was. Yet nobody knew.

*

Fetching water took and hour's walk to the well, and longer back, because water was heavy and sloshy and slowed you down.

But time was not something she cared about. There was just now. Her friends with her, making the trip back cheerful and pleasing.

XII

02 Boys

*where you from, fire beak
where you go, smasher
where you live, soldier boy
where you kill, slasher
on my soil
on my land
on my ground
on my heart*

*where you fly, thunder wing
where you run, dasher
where you crawl, viper son
where you kill, lasher
on my soil
on my land
on my ground
on my heart
on my soul*

*

At the edge of the village the older boys would be playing football on a dry field, while younger boys would be running around chasing each other. A little away, a group of old men would squat together.

*

From a distance, returning from the water well, the children noticed that things were different that day.

The footballing boys, they were not there.
The running around boys, they were not there.
The squatting men, they were not there.

When they neared the village, the children recognised one of the footballers. He lay face down in the dusty, dry soil, blood here and there still gleaming. There were wounds in his back, and a deep cut in his neck.

The children were silent. Each tried to understand what they saw.

“Look,” one of the girls said.

Only then they noticed that they were surrounded by boys lying in the sand, some on their backs, some face down, like the footballer.

They seemed to be resting, sleeping, as some animals do. But the children knew that was not so. Some began to cry.

Finally, all they could think of was to move on. After all, water was needed for cooking and laundering. Silently they navigated between the bodies in the sand.

*

Then there was the screaming of men. Men with rifles and uniforms, with knives and machetes, pistols and harsh voices.

They were everywhere, beating, stabbing, hacking. Some of them fired a shot and Sibye saw one of the girls fall down.

“Not all of them!” one of the men yelled. “Not all of them!”

XIII

03 Captivity

*I have no heart left
pain demands free passage
anger spread my limbs
and entered*

*then I dry tears already dried
seek encouragement, tender courage
wishing hate, devastatingly sweet
would enter*

*

They were twelve girls and eight boys when they went to fetch water. Now they were just eight girls, the boys were not there. A coarse rope around their wrists connected them, as they walked in a procession away from the village, driven forward by shouting and beating soldiers.

After a long walk, they arrived at an open space in a forest, where the men had some sort of encampment.

There were more men there, and more girls, too.
There were huts and fires were burning.
There was also a number of boys. Sibye recognised none of them.

*

A man unknotted the rope around her wrists.

“Come,” he said. She followed him to one of the huts.

As soon as they were inside, he hit her hard against the head with his fist. She fell.

There was a sharp pain she did not know.

She screamed and the man, who was on top of her, hit her again.

Her left ear had become deaf, the pain in her belly was horrible, but she dared not scream anymore.

The man had got up already, fastening his trousers.

Then more men came.

Thirteen years old, she was. Yet nobody knew.

*

There were days, evenings, nights.

And new days, evenings, nights.

And men.

XIV

04 Peace

*do I need a weatherman to know which way the winds blow?
I've no use for bulletins to see which way the streams flow
tell your truths to someone else, leave me be, leave me be
take your gifts to someone else, leave me be, leave me be*

*touch my shoulders with your smile, let your voice entice me
wrap me in your evening cloak, let your words embrace me
tell your truth only to me, love me, love me, love me
bring your gifts only to me, love me, love me, love me*

*

After a few weeks in the camp, the ropes around the girls' wrists were removed. "Just don't try to run," they were told. "We'll always find you!" The girls obeyed.

Afternoons or evenings sometimes brought joy. The girls had formed groups, and there was a lot of chatter, laughter even. At times some of the men would join and then, too the atmosphere was relaxed. The men were cheerful and kind. So different.

*

The young soldier's name was Bara. He had a soft voice, and open, friendly eyes. Often at night, when the soldiers came for the girls, he would sit with her, so she was not taken. "I know what's going on," he said, "and I don't want it to happen to you. But I can't stop it for all."

Sometimes he brought food or drink. Then they talked about everything, the village she was from; did he know what had happened to the boys, to her brother, her mum. But he didn't know. He didn't even know her village.

But she felt safe with Bara.

XV

05 Signs

*here in these woods
you beckoned me
here in these woods
you were with me*

what could I do

*but dance, so free and graciously
to you, dear you*

*here in these woods
you read to me
from ancient scrolls
I watched, excited, eagerly
the past unfold
here in these woods
you are with me*

*

Often, she went into the forest with Bara. There they wandered for hours. Or they sat together, leaning against a tree, talking. He told her about signs that were hidden in the forest. “There are marks, ancient marks, made by our ancestors. My grandfather taught me about those signs. They help you find your way.”

She learned about many signs from Bara. Carved into trees, most of them, sometimes difficult to find; some pointing to open spaces, water wells, even villages.

She absorbed every word he spoke and made him feel heard and important.

And so, they pleased each other. But never would he force her to anything, or even suggest.

XVI

06 With Child

*Mama, how you doing?
Haven't seen you for a mighty long time.
Brother, how you keeping?
I got stories to tell*

*

The bleedings came, the bleedings went. She thought she was injured by what happened the first day in the camp. But some of the girls told her it was common, they, too, bled. It was a woman thing, they said.

When the bleedings stayed away, she thought nothing of it.

XVII

07 Birth

*I love all your faces
I look at you in disbelief
you gave me motherhood
never to be retrieved*

*

There were babies in the camp. They were mostly ignored by the men. None of them felt they were a father. The girls could keep their babies, as long as they fulfilled their duties.

*

“Don’t worry,” Bara had said. “I’ll make sure they’ll stay away from you.” And that’s what happened. Her changing body did evoke glances, even remarks, but apparently the men had enough respect for Bara. And for ‘Mrs Bara’, as they mockingly called her.

*

The baby came fast and without problems. Warm, small and healthy.

With the help of some of the girls, the child was born at a sheltered spot in the woods. A few trees away, Bara had kept watch, out of sight.

The head of the little boy lay on her collar bone, his warm body on her chest. *You can never leave me*, she thought, and her lips bounced hundreds of kisses on the warm, tiny skull.

Was this happiness? Everything about him was beautiful, she wanted to be with him forever. He was admired by the other girls, Bara was sweet and tender to him. She felt so intensely connected and pleased.

XVIII

08 Bara

*What language shall I borrow
to thank you, dearest friend,
for this, your painful sorrow,
my shepherd till the end*

*my thankfulness forever,
unfailing memory
now know that I will never
outlive my love to thee.*

*(Free after
J.W. Alexander)*

*

Her son was three weeks old now. She did not know where he was. She was in a hut. There were men, and three other girls, who looked at her with fear in their eyes.

And Bara was there.

Without a warning, one man hit one of the girls to the ground with his rifle.

She fell to the floor and the man used her. After he was done, another man threw himself on top of her, growling, and had his way.

Out of nowhere, a third man grabbed Bara and together they forced him on the girl, who was bleeding from her nose and mouth.

While Bara was on top of the girl, the men jabbed their rifle butts into his neck and shoulders, shouting and cheering.

After a while, Bara managed to free himself and stumbled out of the hut.

*

The blow against her head was unexpected, but she hardly felt it.

Men came and went, drunk and sweating, on her, inside her. She felt dazed and numb. Outside, she heard shots and men cheering. True pain was in her soul.

*

After what seemed hours, the girls got up and held hands firmly, as if to give each other strength. Two men had stayed behind, asleep and snoring loudly.

The girls silently crept out of the hut.

From a tree, about a dozen yards away to the left, Bara's body was hanging, blood dripping from two or three shot wounds.

*

Silently, Sibye sat with the other girls. One of them handed her the child. She clutched her boy against her chest and cried.

*

She did not wait until it was fully dark. She wrapped her baby in her skirt, held him gently but firmly against her hip and disappeared between the trees.

XIX

09 Forest

*Give me serpent skin
to make me move*

*Give me leopard fur
to make me hide*

*Give me bustard legs
to make me flee*

*Give me parrot beak
to make me feed*

*

The marks Bara taught her were not always easy to find, especially not in the half dark, but she felt she was making progress.

After about an hour she laid herself down and fed her son.

She did not sleep, the child did.

She knew the sounds of the forest, birds, creaking branches, rustling leaves. But now that she was on her own, they seemed different, ominous.

*

At the break of dawn, she breastfed the child and got up to find food.

She found some berries in the bushes and proceeded into the woods.

*

The signs were always there, but she missed Bara.

She kept on walking until her legs told her she could go no further.

It was always dark in the forest, only if she looked straight up, she could tell whether it was night or day. She found a spot to rest and fed the baby. Holding him gently in her arms she lay down.

*

Lying on her back, she could see that the sky was still dark.

She felt hungry and weak. After feeding the child, she lay down again. *I must find proper food tomorrow*, she thought.

XX

10 Child

*the child is running, wild, as children would
the mother, counting birds, embracing trees
the child is muttering words, inhaling breeze
the child is playing, quietly, subdued*

*the child is dancing, twirling arms and knees
the mother, singing, lightly, unconstrued
the child is leaping high, like giants would
the child is speaking, learns of tell-tale seas*

*the child is aching, darkness fills my land
the mother, weeping, weary and confused
the child is shaken, broken down and bruised
the child is fading, darkness hides my land*

*the child has stiffened, crumbled in my hand
the child has died, has died and never knew*

*

But the next day, all she could find were more berries.
Days came, days went.

*

In the morning, she tried to catch some insects, but they were too swift. Then she ate more berries.

*

The baby slept more than before. Often, he would fall asleep while being fed and it took longer and longer to alert him by gently tapping his cheek.

*

She never counted days before, and she did not now. But there were many, since she had fled the camp. Courage was getting lost, despair grew.

She still found Bara's signs but no longer knew whether she was making any progress. Often, she felt dizzy, the trees twirling around her. Her back hurt, and the diet of just berries had caused her diarrhoea, weakening her even more.

*

This morning, the child did not wake up. *You can never leave me*, she said to herself, and wrapped his tiny body in her skirt.

XXI

11 Tree

*Where will you be
how can I reach you
my foothold
my vantage point*

*I long for your shadow
I long for your calm*

*

In the afternoon, the forest seemed lighter, thinner. Now she could see daylight in front of her, not just above. She bent to wade through some low bushes and suddenly faced an open field.

In the centre, on a mound, was a lonely, almost leafless tree.

The sudden bright sunlight startled her, and she stepped back into the bush.

A few yards to the right, she re-entered the field.

She heard the deep, soft beckoning voice of the tree.

“My god! Such loneliness!” Jennifer said. Her face was wet with tears. Neil put his arm around her shoulder and gently squeezed her against him.

“Thank you,” she whispered. “Thank you so much.”

*

“There is one more,” Neil said, “one more poem, but no story came with it. I think Alicia wanted it to speak for itself. It was written out of love, for Sibye, for you. That’s what I feel, no, it’s what I know.”

XXII

12 Stabat Mater

*I keep my face down
my child,
my fruit,
my beauty*

*I wait for the sun to scathe you
I wait for the sand to weather you
I wait for the rain to bathe you
I wait for the wind to leather you*

I wait for the gods to carry you

*but the gods don't come,
gods don't come*

*my child,
my fruit,
my beauty
don't come,
don't go,
can't go*

*my child,
my fruit,
my beauty
can't go,
can't go*

*I keep my thoughts down
my child,
my fruit,
my beauty*

I keep my dreams at bay

*I wait for the hours to pass,
they pass
I wait for the nights to pass,
they pass
I wait for the days to pass,
they pass*

*but the gods don't come,
gods don't come
don't come,
don't go,
can't go,
can't go*

*my child,
my fruit,
my beauty*

Halfway the table top Jennifer's and Neil's fingers met, in a slow
untouching dance, like an insect's antennae. Through her tears
she saw his. *Stabat Mater*, she felt.