



KLAUS HOFFER

Among the Bieresch

TRANSLATED BY ISABEL FARGO COLE

branches off. Don't turn around when I'm talking to you—how often do you need to be told!' she said sharply, but went on at once in a conciliatory tone. 'In one of the two sluices, there was a hole the size of a kitchen hatch. You kids would always dive through there. Even back then the water flow couldn't be regulated. Once a bridge pile got wedged in this hole, and when one of you boys tried to dive through, his head got stuck. At first no one paid any mind, why should they, it was always the same silly game—dive through, let the current carry you downstream and climb out of the water into the bushes a bit further down, so that no one could see you and they'd think you'd drowned. Oslip was the next to dive, and found him.—No matter. You had just gone home, and I took Oslip swimming,' my aunt recounted. She seemed beside herself now, sliding back and forth in the wheelbarrow. 'The boys played for a bit, and suddenly one of them had the idea to take a beam from one of the washed-out bridges and build a see-saw.' She made a dramatic pause, turning towards me furtively as though to gauge my reaction. Rather than look at her, I closed my eyes. It made me faint with rage—less that she had caught me again at my memories than that she had tried to destroy them and turn the tale of the bathing accident into a memory of someone else's story. Behind my closed lids I felt sick, and I clutched the wheelbarrow hands so hard that I broke both thumbs at once from the wooden handles. In my mind I counted my steps to make the feeling go away, but with relentless clarity her words cut through this haze to my ears.

'Oslip fetched the beam,' my aunt went on, turning to face forward again, 'and sat on one end, across from the other boy. The two see-sawed so madly that we all got up and went over to watch them. It merely goaded him on to see me among the spectators.—When the beam touched down, Oslip pushed off with his right foot only, making the see-saw turn in a circle, more and more wildly, swinging up and down as though it had gone berserk.—What are you doing!' my aunt cried. Her story had put me in a trance, the terrain around me rose and

fell like heavy swells and the wheelbarrow swerved back and forth in their midst. 'I feel sick,' I whispered, but she wasn't even listening; instead, entirely caught up in her memories, she intensified the wheelbarrow's sway by clinging to both sides like a child and rocking from side to side. 'You don't like Oslip, that's what's driving you crazy!' she said shrewdly. 'You only like your friends the caretakers, those fine gentlemen! Do you think I didn't notice how you were drawn to their table in the waiting room? Go ahead, rush headlong into disaster, I won't stop you!' She leant all the way back in her wheelbarrow and stared upward vaguely, arms folded under her head. The silence was unbearable, and I flinched when an object—a frog?—struck the water with a splash up ahead. 'I'll spare you the rest,' my aunt said. 'From then on, we met upstairs every day in your father's house.—Your uncle didn't notice. No one noticed a thing, do you hear!' she said triumphantly. I straightened up as though someone had been beating me and now all the blows had been delivered. And even as I stretched out between the wheelbarrow handles to dispel the sense of being at sea, I felt that outside me and around me the entire terrain was stretching, all the water returning into the ground through cracks and fissures, the banks arching over us to collapse and make way for a primeval monster that sloughed off all these crusts and waddled on ahead of us down the narrow defile to the village.—'Oslip is dead!' said my aunt. 'It's all over. You can tell everyone.'

TWO

In the Dance Hall

We had parked the wheelbarrow at the edge of the creek and left it there. My aunt strode on ahead of me, poised and erect, the tip of the umbrella, hip-high, levelled at the village. Now and then she struck it against the rubbish bins that stood by the side of the road, clanging metallically under her blows, dark and dull or bright and ringing depending on the height of the impact.

We took a narrow path leading along the creek and up into the village. A little slope—on which the bins waited, some open, some closed—separated our path from the gravel road. In the dusk it was like a milky white length of fabric laid out on a meadow to dry.—‘Washing day,’ I said to myself, but so softly that my aunt, who kept striking the bins with her umbrella and talking to herself unintelligibly, couldn’t possibly hear me. ‘*The washerwomen in the rain showers,*’² I said under my breath, and, ‘White-washed row houses.’—‘Tulip beds with Dutch maids,’ I said, noting whether my aunt struck her umbrella on the top of the bins or aimed her blows further down, on the barrel.—Further ahead I observed several men in dark overalls in an open garage, holding strangely bent wrenches and spray guns, busy about a jacked-up wrecked car lacking wheels and headlights. The light in the garage was glaring and yellow, and the men inside looked like miners in an old photograph.—When my aunt aimed her blows at the lower halves of the bins, I accompanied her with deep, dark, drawn-out vowels, seeking the higher tones for my words once she raised the umbrella to swing it down on the lid or against the upper rim.

‘He has ophthalmia,’ I said, trying to anticipate the rhythm of her blows with my words. Sometimes two blows fell on one bin, and often

I failed to predict which part of a bin would be struck next. I whispered 'Abnormalities in antimony mines,' but that was wrong, and the more complex my utterances, the rarer the correspondence between the pitch of a word and the blow. I said 'The radio-gramophone producer's carcinoma' and achieved only one correspondence. 'Sundays and Mondays,' I said, and each tone fit perfectly. 'No, only Mondays,' I amended, stepping over a puddle, 'closed on Sundays!' I said, swinging my little black suitcase, 'never on Mondays!'—'Chimeras after camel caravans,' I said, but nothing fit. 'Equestrians!'—and once again the primary stress was correct. 'You're such a weathercock,' I said. 'In winter weather the mountains are white with snow!'—'God knows!' I said emphatically as even the secondary stresses fit.

'What's that you're mumbling about?' my aunt asked, turning towards me. Her dark eyes gleamed reddish as the light of the first streetlamps struck them, and her hair, too, had an almost red shimmer in the artificial light. She was an albino. Refusing to take her seriously at this masquerade, I said nothing, even when she repeated the question and impatiently struck the bin beside her.—'We're there!' she said then with finality, as though this declaration made everything else immaterial. She raised the umbrella and pointed the tip at a low, square house reminiscent of a village school.

The house marked the centre of a square that spread out before us, the rows of houses shrinking back into the dark on both sides. Its facade was unlit; above the entrance, reached by a too-narrow flight of stairs, two lamps rose on curving arms. Further back, on the left side of the house, light burnt in several windows, and through the closed shutters and doors music filtered as though from a fair, mingling with the distant caterwauling of drunks and the babbling of the nearby creek, which emerged here from a duct and flowed under a little bridge. For a time we stood mutely by the house, attending to the sounds, I with my right hand on the bridge railing, my aunt with the umbrella in one hand and the cape over her other, bent arm, pressed

protectively to her chest. I was gazing up to the house's shallow gable when suddenly the light above the door went on and I read the words 'Dance Hall' on a broad swag beneath the gable. The words' twice-repeated *a* had the striking form of a ladder with two crossbars, rising to a point.—Like me, my aunt stood still, as though arrested by this miracle. Then she turned quickly, strode towards the stairs and with a hasty, barely noticeable motion stowed away the umbrella in the dark opening which the builder had left beneath them.

Only upon mounting the first step of the stairs did I realize that the arms of the lamps were indeed human arms of pitch-black wrought iron, growing from a powerful torso cut in relief into the masonry. The hands clasped spherical glass lampshades, aiming them at the torso in such a way that the light fell straight upon the front door. It was a wide door, tapering off at the top in a shallow arch. High up, just above the shoulders and a very short neck, a sun wheel was sculpted into the plaster where the head should have been.—When I took a few steps back to get a better look at the image from further away, it dissolved, and I had to draw closer again to take in the artful execution of the relief and the details. Only from a certain distance did you have the proper impression, as though the whole thing were the work of a myope. If you stood too close, the image blurred, and an obscure force seemed to tug you towards the door; too far, and it dissolved again. Meanwhile, at the bottom of my pocket, my right hand clutched the two wooden thumbs I had broken from the wheelbarrow handles and secretly tucked away.—These wheelbarrow thumbs in my hand and the lamp arms above me on the wall, the correspondence of these two phenomena, their correlation and unrelatedness—all this suddenly struck me as a joke whose underhanded punch line was aimed at me but which I failed to comprehend. Fist clenched in my trousers, I quickly followed my aunt through the front door into a narrow, brightly lit corridor where the first godfather greeted us with the words: 'You certainly took your time!'