The Book of Life

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T H E   B O O K   O F   L I F E

1.

The bus is driving along a ridge; I look out the back window down into the valley. The landscape hasn't changed, just the point of view. I no longer look on the frenzied mob with frenzied eyes. Although there is no snow on the ground, I remember the tracks left by the small animals. The tracks of a small mouse ending behind the barn in a flurry of owl wings.

One day my last footprint will be found too, but I do not want to face that yet. I have time now, even though I did lose much of that as well. But was it a loss after all? I was just tested and tried—I was just in a sort of a dream in which I experienced all the consequences of abandoning my natural environment.

Perhaps my home landscapes in disappearing for a summer actually grew within me! I did grow inside. Expanded? Matured? Still, it was a difficult time. Do you know how it feels when you can't draw a proper breath? Do you know how it feels when someone else comes and says that life must go on? I was in a place where there weren't many directions left to go. I did not decide to leave; I did not want to expand; I would have wanted to stay lying on the ground where I was without getting up.

I am especially thankful to Seppo Sutinen, Zen, who understood me. Zen read me his strange poems, which did not seem to have any sense to them at first, but which in the end had all the power I needed to make it home. Making it home meant accepting my own incompleteness. He asked me:

"What is?"

What could I say to a question like that? Nothing when I first heard it, but over the months that question opened a space before me in which I was neither absolute good nor absolute evil, neither absolute heat nor absolute cold, neither absolute wealth nor absolute poverty. It was only a question of purity, which Zen called light. Still this space was not a new religion; it was just a matter of calmness, without which I would not be here anymore.

But before that light I screamed at the wall of the barn: fall on me, crush me, let me fall to ruin with you!

2.

I was seventeen then.

When I called out from the edge of the field, the cows stood up from resting and followed after me. I could have walked with them even as far as the village; I could have made my cows stand in the middle of the road, made them moo true culture at the residents of Shallows; I could have gotten my cows to ruminate on the football field, but I led them to the barn where each in turn donated its milk to the tank. The udders gave nourishment: milk, cheese, yogurt, ice cream. I was, with the cows, an important part of the food chain.

I was very aware and proud of my necessity.

We lived in the village of Shallows, in the eastern heartland, right where the fells began to rise up all around like great walls. To me those walls were safe and protective. Eighteen columns of smoke rose between the fells; from my window I could see everyone's fields and houses. On cold winter nights I looked down into the valley and could see the lights in each living room. They would be extinguished one after another. I was the last awake.

In the village of Shallows I tried to gain the level of sensitivity that animals have, and I succeeded. I felt like my hearing had become as sensitive as a dog's, my eyes became as sensitive as an owl, and my skin like the crust of the earth could feel the changing of the weather.

I saw. I was compelled to see, but it was a pleasant compulsion. Such a beautiful landscape could not but be admired. And the darkness of the evenings! It was beautiful. Dangerously beautiful to others who had become numb to everything, who had gotten used to getting up and going to their beds dreaming of trips abroad, of stone-free fields, dreaming of something that they could not see with their eyes.

To me it was precisely seeing that was most important. No one knew that in my eyes this landscape was the only reality I believed in, and which I loved. And although it was the same landscape every day again and again, I never tired of it.

After the last lights were extinguished, I was alone. And I saw even more. I saw behind the darkness and in that reality moved wolves, bears, hares, and the lynx. And when I stood in the darkness in the yard of our home and listened, I heard the frigid cold snapping a limb in two and the snow crunching under my feet, but I also heard myself saying things to myself that I could not tell anyone about:

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I was told:

“You have the spirit of the land, the spirit of silence; stay here; this is your place.

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3.

The final spring came. A strange, swift rushing came and everything was washed away.

"How can anyone stand to live here anymore?" Father said.

"Well, call the slaughter wagon, load up all the cows, and let's be done with it!" Mother said.

I would have wanted to set down my roots in this earth permanently. The others wanted more for me even though I already knew then that a small heaven would have been enough for me.

But here I now sit, camera around my neck.

I feel more powerful than three months ago, but I still have a certain timidity. I have to look around carefully. But I still have to look.

The bus turns in a circle behind the farmer's co-op building and stops in front of the bus station.

If I had not learned anything in the hospital, if I were my old self, I would have seen hands around me, depressed eyes, greedily pushing me away from here again, away from a small life in which others failed to see anything of significance happening.

As if I were supposed to redeem their dreams, to leave in their stead to enjoy the opportunities of the great centers of humanity. Their dream was to get away to somewhere else.

"You are a young person; get out of here; fulfill your dreams; fulfill our dreams. If you stay here, all you will ever see is the village road, bleak and short, and you won't have any choices. If you stay here, you choose a lonely death."

The winters were the worst thing pushing me away, the last winter worst of all. As flat as the snow on the roofs, heavy, full of weariness, many villagers were just waiting for a collapse, a final fall to the slushy ground.

When Father and Mother sold the cows, the possibility of staying here felt impossibly small. Up to that point there had been life in the yard: Father and Mother's trips to the barn, the visits from the milk truck, the flurries of the snow blower—all those things disappeared when the slaughter wagon came.

An untaken picture: I look out the window as the cows are being dragged away.

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Mother and Father pull Addo into the truck. She is my cow, my favorite cow, an Ayrshire with whom I had grown up since childhood, whom I had fed from a bottle so she would live. Her mother died birthing, and I became Addo's mother.

I run out and grab a crowbar from the storage barn wall, hitting the truck's tire with it, hitting it like making a hole for a hay pole. My strength is great; I want to stop everything. Father snatches the crowbar from my hand and orders through clenched teeth:

"Stop crying!"

I resolve in my anger to stop crying for the rest of my life. Mother walks me into the house and snaps:

"Stop being a hysterical baby! I'm ashamed at the sight of you!" This is the first time I've been called hysterical, and the word begins to intrigue me.

Hysteria, that has to do with mental health. I am close to mental health, you'll see, I have mental health! I understand that cows shouldn't be killed; I am hysterical, but what about the rest who stay calm, pushing living creatures before the slaughterer without batting an eyelash. Where is their hysteria!

Father bursts into the house and hisses—doesn't scream or cry—but hisses:

"They're killing the country; no one can live here anymore!"

Here he goes again! We've heard this before, I think. But even father can only hiss—he has no words that can undo what has been done. The cows are in the truck. Its tail-lights are receding. There go our work and bread and good night's sleep!

Hissing, a pathetic attempt at being a snake—that's all it is. Where is the rage, the hysteria? I have so much inside me now! I'll knock down stone houses if they get in my way. Mother turns into a mouse, but can't hear her own squeaking. Father hisses and eats mother. That's how we handle things. We take the cows from the yard and set the fathers and mothers to fighting.

That evening is wordless and silent. A sorrowful evening. Father is in his own corner, mother in hers, and me there in the middle looking at their empty faces.

Father and Mother have a plan, of course they do. The house will be sold as soon as a buyer can be found, and enough of a loan has been gotten already with the money from the cows that they've bought three rooms and a kitchen in the city. But what have they planned for me? You will continue high school in the city or go to vocational school. That's what they think, but I won't have

any of it. I respond that I'm going to stay here to live, and it isn't long until they're rushing me to the hospital for the silent.

4.

But now spring is behind us and summer too, and it is easier for me to make sentences, almost easier than making the shit in the barn.

I was taken to a closed ward, where I heard hopeless cries. They reminded me of the howls of lone wolves in Shallows. A few days later I was transferred to the youth ward, where I can now say that I was treated well. I was listened to. The rare phrases I was able to get out of my mouth were analyzed and they tried to shape a new world view for me. It was apparently important for me to see the present moment and reality.

At first I thought that my reality would be a disappointment for them. They said they understood the causes of depression, but they did not understand that I did not want to give up. I thought that the attendants would have liked for me to accept that the house was left empty, that the fields that Gramps and Gran cleared were left to grow full of weeds. I did not want weeds in my brain; I wanted wheat for myself and oats and rye and hay for Addo. Addo had been killed and eaten. Not even a cow was given a natural death, why should a person be? As I sat in the lobby a gaunt boy strode in front of me and asked:

"What is?"

Crazy is as crazy does, I thought. He wouldn't be here otherwise. But that meeting was the beginning of our friendship, which has lasted up to the present day.

"What is?" I pondered that question many times during the summer and still do. That is the most important question of all. Two words that opened up my thoughts more than the hundreds of hours in school during which they attempted to teach me the basics of life.

Zen had been sent to the hospital because he had begun to identify too closely with clouds. He imagined he was a raincloud and cried himself dry.

"Look at the clouds in the sky—they don't ask each other for passports," Zen said. "Nature is free."

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5.

It’s easy for me to talk now that I’m returning to my former home.

I exit the bus. On a poster on the wall of the bus station is the face of an unfamiliar singer. The dance hall was sold at auction for firewood last spring on the eve of my departure.

I get into a taxi and say:

“Shallows please.”

“Shallows up near the lily marsh?” the driver asks.

“Yes.”

The driver looks at me in the rear-view mirror. I’m still me, I think, let the driver think what he will. The driver rubs his brow, clearly intending to say something, but still considering.

Then he asks, as if afraid to speak:

“Are you one of Haavikko’s daughters?” I nod.

“Elli?”

“Marja.”

“The younger?”

I don’t bother to answer. I clutch my camera and try to pick out landmarks, trying to find that past autumn when I was able to live and to which I want to return. The car rolls smoothly along the familiar road. The driver tunes to Radio Nova.

“Is this music OK?”

It’s all the same, I think. Still, I would rather not listen to anything. I had been learning to love silence when I was a child, not to mention the last few months, forced to live within four walls.

The walls of the hospital were no replacement for the fells of Shallows. The four walls were too close, no matter how hard they tried to say that I needed boundaries. Supposedly I needed to find myself, not to identify so much with nature, so I would not feel like I was so broad. I understand the psychology now, although I rebelled against it in the beginning. And I understand my rebellion as well—how could a room be safer place for a person than a wide open field?

I look at the grayness of the land, the silent motion of the heather, the leafless arms of the birches reaching toward the sky, the rimy skin of the roadsides, the crusty eyes of the ditches. Familiar images flow over me from my distant childhood.

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Now I have time to look at them. Nature is preparing for a stabbing pain, the merciful blanket of white purity. The landscape is just as beautiful as before going to the hospital. I remember how sometimes in elementary school I would even be late to school because the land was so beautiful.

"Your Mother and Father are living in the city and doing well?"

I nod even though I don't want to. I feel my cheeks burning. If I were to settle down here the same thing would start up all over again. The taxi drivers would yell, the teachers would yell, the farmers would yell, the shopkeepers would yell: "Get out of here and tell us what it's like off in the city!"

Their dreams would gradually creep into me again, cramming themselves into my heart; it would beat insanely; it would feel sick; it would following its own rhythm, skipping beats and hopelessly trying to flee my breast. I would push my hand under my coat and rip it out, watching its final beats and then returning to Addo.

The villagers' dreams would become barbed-wire fences around me; I would wind it into a ball and stuff it into my chest as a new heart. A cold heart to beat no more.

And I would scream at them NO! There is nothing wrong with the city! But believe me! There is nothing wrong with Shallows either; I want to stay here!

The problem is in imagining that things would be better somewhere else, somewhere else would be grander, somewhere else would be more expansive.

Zen asked me:

"What is?"

And I answered him:

"I remember the veins in my Gran's hands and her wrinkled skin."

"Are you meaning to settle down on the property again?" the driver asks.

Let him ask; I don't feel like answering. I give him a ten and don't wait for change. I slam the door closed after me and watch how the tires spin in the slush as the taxi leaves.

Now I stand alone amid the red ocher buildings, in the yard of my home in Shallows.

With my camera I take my first picture of a wide open field.

> Your feet will yet carry you to unknown paths—new, strange, familiar roads.
> Return to see what you did not dare to look at.
> Record your childhood and youth, record the marks you left and you will get your smile back.

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So nurse Salme had written in my notebook on the last day.

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