

Event Horizon by Balsam Karam

published by Norstedts, 2018

Rights: Norstedts Agency

Linda Altrov Berg, linda.altrovberg@norstedts.se

English sample translated from the Swedish by Alice E. Olsson and Saskia Vogel, pp 41-53

It could have been any year at all – once again chestnut trees flamed like lanterns over the gates to the wharf in the spring and settling along the beach was a haze that broke in and lifted up the water coloured pink to spray the sky.

The city lay stretched out flat and weary and like other summers it let itself be driven to a way of breathing other than its own; the roar of the sea, white and foaming, lapped the strip of sand to the pulse of the cruise ships and along the avenues the cafés were putting out their tables and opening their parasols once more. Docile, the beach stretched out beneath the tourists' white feet, dragged between dense stalls selling soap and whisky, and the tired, bored vendors stood by their carefully stacked goods and smiled. This one? I'm practically giving it away, how many would you like?

It was to this place that the mothers and, later, the children of the Outskirts used to go; to this market where they under the arboreal shadows that framed the promenade unfolded a towel and took out crocheted washcloths in green and pink, long necklaces of crushed china and coloured glass, and one or two trivets made from odd books, bottle caps and metal lids. Here, madam, feel this – the softest cotton and linen, crocheted and dyed by hand. I'm practically giving it away, how many would you like?

At dawn, first the mothers and later the children too would mount the Outskirts' single broken bike in order to spend three days and two nights carefully unfolding the towel by the promenade and placing out necklaces and washcloths.

As the third night drew near, the mothers and children would pedal all the way back in the safety of darkness and when they finally arrived at the foot of the mountain they'd help each other carry the bike up the slope of the Outskirts and in among its homes. There, all the other mothers were waiting with tea and sugar – with bread, butter and coffee if there was any – and with freshly washed shirts for them to change into.

It was either very late at night or very early in the morning.

It was early enough for the children to be up but far too late for them to want to sleep, and just as the children resumed their game – waiting, watching and running to the edge of the slope to see if anyone was climbing it – the sun rose over the mountaintop in a blaze of blue and green and so the day began.

Yes, the children and sisters of the Outskirts waited for their home-coming and welcomed them with heated water and mango found among the rubbish and cut into small pieces over the fire. The moment they'd washed away the city dust and wrapped towels around their

bodies, those who had returned were fed the fruit, now warm, which they carefully took in their mouths and rolled under their tongues. By then they had not eaten for a day and a half and hoped to get something more to eat after a good night's sleep, here in their home, here in the shadow of the mountain that rose black against the red sky in the afternoons and right next to the ditch that purred and bobbed brown and green past the houses of the Outskirts. Here, at home, embraced by their own, with tea steeped over the fire and by the sides of houses where the morning sun made its way to warm the walls of corrugated iron and tarpaulin stretched between the houses.

Later, when the Outskirts had found a second bike to use, the mothers and children who either pulled the cooler fully-packed across the beach or spread out their necklaces along the promenade in the evenings would pedal to town together, and there would be more of them who carried things there and more who carried things back, more who picked out fruit, milk cartons and what bags of onions they could find in the dumpsters, and more who ganged up when cars with windows rolled down suddenly slowed and stopped across the street.

It could have been any year at all; autumn came later than usual and took the place of winter and the water pipes were extended and the tap was switched out in accordance with Milde's terms and conditions. In the morning the Outskirts waited to hear news of Milde's imminent space flight and thus sat down in clusters to eat whatever was at hand around Essa's portable radio turned up loud. Had she left yet? Where was she? Would she come here to visit beforehand? Who was holding her captive? The mothers and the children continued to gather for months until news of Milde had ceased and Essa no longer got up in the morning and no one dared knock on her door asking to borrow that radio. One morning the children who were waiting for Essa in the school would no longer put up with having an absent teacher and would troop to her door. Come now Mother Essa, it's enough now the children would say and Essa would lift the tattered rag from her eyes and sit up on the mattress.

It was the year of the departure and of sleepless nights in the pool — meals and coffee breaks in the dining room of a spaceport and the body which either laid itself down at its own feet and gave up, or stretched out on the floor, trying to remember.

Milde ate when she was supposed to and slept when she was supposed to — went on walks when she was supposed to and showered as she pleased.

The women Milde had gotten to know at the spaceport and who invited her for tea and cake in the staff room, nothing more than a kitchen with five broken chairs and a window cracked open onto the courtyard, kept telling her how much they admired her and how they wished her luck. Milde would look at them and say: I'm doing it for the sake of my sisters and for the Outskirts. So that for once in my life I may dissolve into surroundings that resemble me, and to once again live in the hope that somewhere out there is a world that wishes me well and wishes I were I there.

Of course I can travel up into space and die, why not? I'd rather die in the depths of a black hole than wait around to be executed here, if you see what I mean. I'm doing it so that I can lean back and for once rest without a knife or the lid of a pot under my pillow and if only for one day not have to look at those same white faces wishing me harm.

Of course I can travel up into space and die, why not? I'd rather die there than continue to be at their disposal here if you see what I mean. I'm doing it for the sake of my sisters and for the Outskirts – for the children and the slope and the cats' meowing just as it's time to sleep and the mist is pressing against the roofs; I'm doing it for the sake of the washing lines and the wash buckets, and for every tap in every place where taps rust away but damn well keep working, do you see what I mean?

The women would put a hand on her shoulder, push the coffee pot across the table nodding silently. They would hug her again when she got up to leave and visit her with tea and cake in the evenings. You'll not go to bed hungry they would say and Milde would nod and say thank you.

The nights were longer at the spaceport than in the prison, she didn't know why.

The body that for eleven years had been missing its left eye and both index fingers would look at its broken nose in the mirror at night and trace a hand over its collar bones. It would trace the stub of its index finger over deep scars on its arms, legs and stomach, and in the glow of the bathroom light slowly count them as if to then be able to set them aside.

The body would try to remember how the dungeon smelled and what the body looked like when after eleven days it was finally allowed to rinse off the menstrual blood that had run down its thighs and caked like darker incisions across its calves and heels. Milde would try to

remember how painful it was and how pain was measured back then, according to what measure and why, and how come she no longer measured pain that way.

Milde remembered that the places of torture were connected to the houses where the prisoners lay on a damp prison floor and, cold and stiff, placed their hands under their heads until they went numb and woke them up.

Across one such prison floor, where the prisoners had blindly crawled their way forward in order to find a corner in which to piss and shit, Milde too had lain curled up with her legs against her stomach and tried to fall asleep, this she remembers.

The places of torture and where Milde was later woken by her numbing hands and sought out the corner where she'd pissed before so she could piss there again, were just below the prison floor she was making her way across in the dark, scraping her body against it. She crawled over to the wetness in the corner, squatted and wiped her hand across the wall for lack of clothing on which to dry herself.

It was in one of the rooms below the prison floor that she had sat awake on a chair for five days and five nights begging to be allowed to go to the toilet, she was menstruating.

Milde had said: I have to pee and I'm menstruating, please let me go to the toilet.

The blood, ebbing and flowing, had run out of her and dried, she had writhed in the chair and gotten nowhere.

When finally she pissed herself she was released by the guard who then undressed her and wiped the floor, darkened with urine and soiled deep-red, using her shirt and pants, which were frayed at the knees and hem.

The guard had then picked up the stained clothes and dressed Milde again, lifted her back onto the chair and pressed her body, now cold in the wet garments, against the seatback, hands cuffed behind her.

After that he would only approach Milde in order to undress her, wipe up and put her clothes back on. Ever colder and now more bruised she'd slide in and out of his grip and again and again slip down to the floor, where she'd stay.

When the guard after impossible to say how long had come over to clean up what she had strained to hold in and that had spilled from her loose and pale brown, she had screamed that she'd rather be naked, they could leave her as she was, let me freeze to death, don't dress me again, don't dress me again you asshole do you hear me, you make me sick Milde had screamed before she was met in the mouth by the butt of a rifle and collapsed.

Later she had woken up to the stench of herself and then to the absence of all sound. This is what it was like to face the dungeons and this is how all the sisters with whom she

later shared a cell would remember it: they'd opened their eyes in the dark and had found nothing, closed and opened them once again, and again had found nothing.

In the dungeons where initially each was kept on her own, their ulcered fingers had searched their faces from mouth to eye socket — pressing into their wide-open eyes to assure themselves that they were there — and let those hands fall once more.

The prisoners had said something, to test their voice, and heard nothing. They'd repeated what they'd said but louder now and still nothing.

They'd stuck their fingers in their mouth and felt their tongue, counted their teeth and wiggled their toes. They'd run their hand across the bridge of their nose, asking if their nose had always been like this and in that case for how long, run their hand across their hair, asking if the taste of blood had always been so pungent and in that case since when.

The prisoners had lain down to sleep on the damp prison floor and pressed their nose against it, tried to sniff out the source of the damp and whether the overspill from the drain ran down the rough walls; they had wondered if someone had been in here before them and in that case who it had been, and whether they were still bleeding menstrual blood or if the blood came from elsewhere.

It wasn't until the cell doors had been flung open and something had been thrown inside — first bread, then water in bottles hitting her body — that Milde realised some of her vision was still intact.

Afterwards she'd searched for the crack in the door for days on end — crawled up to it right when it was time for the door to be flung open — and aided by the light tried to find what gave a contour to her gaze and allowed it to navigate.

To begin with the prisoners would always shut their eyes and in this way hold the memory of the door crack for longer inside them, bringing it to life between turns and trying to imagine that somewhere out there was still a sky and a sun, a sandy beach, a sea and cats bounding down the paths cut by mothers and children who fell into each other's arms and did not wish each other harm.

After a while they'd realised they could turn away from the door right as the key was shoved into the lock so as to let the light reveal to them something in their cell; the floor and ceiling, how small they were, the corners and cracks, what was there.

The prisoners had let the light from the crack in the door illuminate the cell and so they knew where to go to eat and where to go to pee — where they should be to avoid the impact of the water bottles against their back and ribcage, and where they should lay down to sleep when nothing but sleep could help.

Milde remembered that in the places of torture the light could sometimes be tinged with blue and sometimes with a dazzling white that stopped her eyes now accustomed to the dark from functioning. Later she was unable to summon the vision of any other light as clearly and had on some nights, still dazzled, difficulty sleeping. When one afternoon between coffee and coffee she told the women in the spaceport about the changing colour of the light they all created their own memory with which to connect it. One said the morning my mother left me on my own and another said when I was seven years old and got lost in the rooms of the hospital where grandmother was on her death bed.

Milde said: In the torture room there was a marble floor, gray and white concrete walls and a steel chair that made the body conduct electricity.

She remembered that her body was always damp and that she'd fallen to the floor many times. She also remembered the interrogations and her back-bound hands, how the policemen inhaled, cigarettes between their lips, and blew smoke in the prisoners' faces, stamping lit cigarettes on the prisoners' nipples then forcing them to scrub the wounds clean with soap and water.

It was said that Milde was the brains behind the uprising, the first to suggest arson and the one who had long been agitating the Outskirts' children and mothers; she had been seen on site and was said to be the one who'd procured the rifles and who'd refused to name her collaborators. That is why they stubbed out a cigarette in her eye right before the end of the final interrogation and she was carried to a cell where twenty new sisters were waiting, and dropped down among them unconscious. She was forced to remove the cigarette butt herself and after twelve days the whole eye using a pair of nail scissors someone had managed to smuggle inside, then didn't know what to do with the eye and finally called the guard over and placed the eye in his hand. The sisters in the cell had held her head in their arms, pressed her chest as if to make her hold her breath and handed her the nail scissors with care. Milde had in fact held her breath and then collapsed, had let her hair be caressed with slow, soft strokes and stayed with her new-found sisters for eleven years.

Holding her tray in the food line at the spaceport Milde would look at one of the cold-buffet managers and say: Once I ran across the mountain with a rifle slung over my shoulder and at dinner time my foot slipped and I fell into a hollow. It wasn't high up, but there I was, stuck for hours all the while the sun licked the sugar cane fields and stung my eyes. Do you know what that feels like?

Milde would say: In the prison I found a second home with other sisters and other mothers and when they called me to the isolation cell someone else always stood up and said

“here I am” and followed the guard out. And they threw Sabina in the isolation cell and they threw Marisol in the isolation cell and they threw Silvia in the isolation cell time and time again. And when one day they called Sabina to the isolation cell I got up and said that I was her and gladly followed the guard who didn’t notice that my left eye and both my index fingers were missing. Do you know what that feels like?