

The Aspens

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The boy's death is not mentioned in the documents from Råby.

Only in the interrogation transcript does he come up — in Kahl's report, the one that was misplaced, or excluded, but later, much later, turned up again.

However: there is a surprising passage in one of the Baron's last entries. In his fussy, aging, slightly shaky penmanship he writes:

Last night I could hear the Creature again.

The paws skidding and darting across the wood in there. The body thudding against the walls. The sound very close now. Its eerie cries.

I would like to tell you, about the Creature: In my dreams, I always rescue him.

The entry is dated 1865, on Good Friday. I imagine he is referring to the boy.

THE GRAY CITY (B.)

It was B's friend Endre who finally got me to come back to the city and to Ramels Väg.

I took the train, I brought one bag, it was spring.

I had no intention of staying.

Outside the window of the train, bright sunlight; I closed my eyes and let the city approach, the insides of my eyelids already black and flickering. Then: flocks of rooks over the flat land as we passed Lund and the small, colorless towns between, the sky white now over the rapeseed fields, no more sun.

And then I was there.

Marga was standing on the platform, waiting for me.

She looked frailer than usual as she shifted side to side under the fluorescent lights, drawing her down coat tighter around her body. Shivering, despite the mild May weather. Her tiny, crooked figure looked out of place in the now renovated station building with its clean color palette, its muted modernity. No more swallows diving beneath the high ceilings, like when I was a child. The monotonous sound of roller bags across the black stone of the station floor. And then Marga, amid the current of arriving passengers. Her smile: elated or frightened.

Drizzling rain was falling over Malmö Central Station as we walked along the canal; some kids were leaning over the bridge railing and watching as their globs of spittle were sucked straight down into the ashy whirls, vanishing. For a moment Marga gazed up at the sky, as if she were on the lookout for something only she could see, the sharp daylight fell across her

wrinkled face with its heavy makeup and the nakedness of her expression made me want to turn away.

She unfolded the umbrella she'd brought along, and I was back.

When I was a child I often felt that Malmö wasn't really Malmö, but something else that had taken root inside us, something that had dug its way down into our bodies and watched and guided our every movement. I liked to study the light shifting over the facades of the buildings and the squares of the sidewalks, how they seemed to swell, as if they were breathing, changing shape under the streaks of sunlight that fell through the quilt of clouds and ran across their surfaces in nervous starts. This was before I understood that the city was in fact like a rock: unyielding, immovable, unreachable to light. When I think about our childhood, this is the very picture I see: the ordinary, gray city, unchangeable, stony.

It was still winter when Endre called; I was standing by the front door and had just taken out my apartment keys. Årstaviken was frozen over in the distance; the trees on the other side were shapeless and black as tar. His voice sounded a bit different, but I could tell it was him. Traffic in the background. He said he was on furlough, that the phone wasn't his.

Later, in the spring, he hung on his bike on the path along Jesus Park where we had planned to meet a few days after my return to Malmö. He straightened up as he saw me crossing Nobelvägen. He was undeniably thin, and older. But he was still beautiful, still a boy somehow, although by now he was a not-so-young man in his thirties, still with the curls he'd had as a boy. He revealed the two missing teeth he still hadn't done anything about in a quick, childish smile as he slid a Hemköp grocery bag off the handlebars and handed it to me.

Here, he said.

Later, slower, more searching:

You who write.

Almost summer.

Birds rising or plunging from the trees.

I have to start with the boy. With Råby, the slanted light over snowy plains. 1845. The January wind through the black branches of the Astrakan apples. The creaking weight of the body under the rope. Later: the porcelain faced child, already frostbitten, already deeply sunken into itself.

I have to start with the boy.

That cunning, even brazen, death.

I don't know what I was hoping for from Ramels Väg, why I let myself be talked into coming back. Maybe I had only been waiting for something, for a sign.

I sit on Marga's balcony; the street is deserted and hot below me, with the odor of burned asphalt. She has made the bed for men in B's old room, which is still exactly as it used to be. When I went away from her she filled my room with boxes and papers and old garment bags, the sort of things she thinks she has to keep; she sleeps in the old white-leather corner sofa, just like when we were little. She never stops keeping watch over me, not even when she sleeps, you could say it's her constitution: or maybe it's the other way around, maybe I have once again begun to watch over her.

I came back, I stayed for a summer, before the autumn arrived. I hadn't been planning to follow her, Marga, where she wanted me to go.

The scent of the yellowed lawns through the open bedroom windows. The old clock radio crackling on the dresser under the teenage posters in B's untouched room.

I sit on the balcony and smoke or drowse lightly, the aspen trees on the other side of Ramels Väg are still there, that small grove of thick and summery foliage just before Rosengård Field takes over and spreads down the slope. On the other side, the narrow strips of road heading for the Jägersro neighborhood, with its straight rows of single-family homes

made of bricks or white plaster. None of our old neighbors still live here, not even Endre's dad, only Marga, as if some secret force kept her from leaving. The families in the apartments around our courtyard are bigger now, more children, their steps echo off the stairwell walls like the sharp, deformed sounds at an indoor pool. Otherwise the neighborhood is the same, just grimmer, more run-down, like an aging face, its chiseled lines deepening. No one seems to keep up the building, or maybe it is kept up sparingly; there are burned matches on the stairs and old orange peels cast across the white-dotted seventies-era cement. The pale blue plaster is falling from the walls in great chunks and the overgrown flowerbeds in the courtyard are full of diapers heavy with urine and feces, broken machine parts, cardboard, and trash. Then the aspens, taller now, with a ring of new growth shooting up around the grove of erect trunks. They say aspens do that when they're dying, in a last-ditch effort to survive. The young trees grow up around the old one, replacing it, surrounding it, until at last it's gone.

I don't know why I had to accept Endre's wrinkled bag, why I agreed to his peculiar suggestion and returned to Marga and Ramels Väg. Why I began to spend as much time thinking about the boy as I did. About Råby. Instead of everything else I could have been thinking about.

Sooner or later, I always find another story to tell. After all, the writing only lasts for an instant. No more. Nights pass in the blink of an eye. Then I'm back again, in the room with the posters and the radio, in Marga's home.

Marga's and B's.

There is no understanding a mother. She only appears.

On occasion, when Marga isn't home, I open the door to my old room and make my way through the boxes bursting with clothes and trash and time-worn toys. The glow-in-the-dark stars on the ceiling, above the spot where the bed once stood, and under which B. and I used to sleep, are still

there. Otherwise she's taken away everything that once belonged to me, the way you might purge after a death — only these childish stick-on stars reveal that I ever existed here. I walk through the cluttered room; I stop at the window. Then I stand just as I used to and gaze down at the well-worn sandbox in the front yard, as if no time has passed. Sometimes it's as if I can see them again, Endre and B., engrossed in their shovels and buckets or some grandiose thing they're constructing with their small, hooded heads close together. Then they suddenly look up and grin and squint at me, like they could actually feel my eyes on them.

I hadn't been back for long before Endre couldn't help himself anymore and began to call.

Most of the time he calls at night or early in the morning, as the day is dawning. A few times he doesn't say anything, but I know it's him. Sometimes he's so high it's hard to make out what he's saying. He calls from hotel rooms or friends' homes where he stays temporarily; sometimes from Stippe's or some other all-night joint where he's eating or panhandling, and I can hear the old jukebox blaring in the background, people, sirens. Often he's talking about B., I have to guess, but indirectly, without any context. At times I place the phone on the pillow beside me or on the floor next to the bed and let him ramble on, or just doze off and go silent as I pull the sheets tighter around my body and make myself a cocoon, still protected, waiting. If the voice grows too chemical or slurry, I hang up and turn to face the wall and try to fall back asleep. Endre. I don't know why he continues to talk to me, or survive. Beyond the window above the head of the bed: Ramels Väg, extending past the upright buildings, lazy with summer, deserted.

At the top of the wrinkled Hemköp bag was the diary, the Baron's book. The last entries were written near the very end, in Lund, in 1865, just before the elderly landowner's death in May. Under that book lay Kahl's report. There

is no trace of the diary or the report in the official records from Råby; they seem to have been lost or removed from the records, or, more probably, never been intended for the archives. Endre had placed it all in two separate plastic pouches; it looked orderly in a way that surprised me when it came to him, the wrinkled bag was more in keeping with his style. He actually wanted something completely different from me I realize that now. Maybe I knew it from the start.

Incidentally, there were more things that I understood before long. Like the fact that he called Marga too, that there had been some sort of collaboration, which obviously revolved around me.

But Endre was the one who got me to return.

The image of him leaning across his bike at Jesus Park with that unmistakable smile, handing it all over to me, like bait. His blue-black, slightly frizzy hair. Those unnaturally large kneecaps above his shins, like those of a calf or someone dying.

I took the bag; I allowed myself to be lured back.

The first image of the boy, the one that returns: the tree in the wind, the flat land outside that offers no protection from anything. The half-closed eyelids that lend an expression of enjoyment to the dead face; it almost looks wanton: a person might imagine that the neck was broken immediately by the weight of the body, as easy as wringing the neck of a small hen. The face washed clean under the wadmäl cap. He is wearing his leather Sunday shoes on his feet, as if he dressed for a special day. He has chosen one of the most visible trees for his stunt, just where the orchard begins. To the right are the workshops and the inmates' dormitory; next to that is the teachers' quarters. A little farther off: the bell tower rising from the main building like a thin finger pointing skyward. They discover him at dawn, his body stiff as a board from the night chill; at first they don't take him down, and then they do. By that time they have summoned Kahl, who arrives in a coach from the

parsonage in Lund in the dull light of dawn (the Baron is still asleep at Björnstorp, in the room with the lily wallpaper and the mounted moose head). As the small crew removes the stiff, dressed-up child from the apple tree, the inmates are already milling on the drive outside the main building. Indistinct faces, white ovals bobbing above the gravel and snow. Kahl is standing beside the parked coach, gently fingering the fur collar at one shoulder, then the other, fingering. The boy's body, still dangling from the knotted branch like a little bell clapper, before the rope is cut and the corpse tumbles into the arms of one of the on-duty teachers. The man looks surprised as he staggers, for an instant, under the weight of the boy, his boots fumble on the slushy slope before he regains his balance. Kahl: his fingers still running over his fur collar, his thoughtful (slightly evasive?) expression. Then the light growing stronger between the stables and the workshops before the first rays of morning sun burst out across the field.

I have to start with the boy.

THE BOY (THE SLEEP)

The boy, during his intake at Råby, gives his full name as Johan Petrus Nyholm. The middle name is nowhere to be found in the baptismal record, but since the boy insists, it is allowed to stay. He is assigned to be Inmate 12. The documents from Råby list his year of birth as 1830 and his place of birth as an address located in east Malmö and known colloquially, due to the great number of peddlers and “Jew hucksters” living there, as Jerusalem. He is noted to be an orphan as the result of a stabbing that took the life of his unwed mother, apparently committed by a previously law-abiding neighbor in the mother’s own home: a room with no kitchen located in one of the low buildings along the fence on the outskirts of the neighborhood, on the other side of which the so-called Kattesund had once run, a narrow street in which a long waterway carried the city’s dirty water out to the moat. This is where the mother was supposed to have provided, by way of harlotry, for herself, the boy, and an unnamed sibling to the same. Both children are reported to have been witnesses to the crime; after the deed the sibling is placed in the Corrections House at Malmö Fortress while the boy himself, eight years old at the time, mysteriously disappears when he is to be deposited in a poorhouse in the western part of the city. For the next few years, the boy is said to live a vagabond’s life, roaming a number of counties and provinces, where he is spotted on various occasions but evades capture each time. As he moves between farms and villages, the boy portrays himself as afflicted by a variety of fabricated deformities, apparently to garner sympathy: he plays at being deaf-mute, insane, and one-legged; at times he also feigns the ability to cure illnesses in some secret fashion. At last he is taken into custody at Kivik Market after he is discovered selling wares on behalf of a merchant but

attempting to hide a portion for his own use. He is then brought to Lund county court and first sentenced to birching, but later, on account of his tender age and since he is “by way of his depravation judged to be exceedingly qualified,” assigned a place at the newly established house for the rescue of wayward boys in Råby.

Five times the boy attempts to escape from the institution in Råby, with the consequences being corporal punishment and the customary outfit of shame constructed from a burlap sack.

The first time, he hides under a load of hay in a goods cart. Later on, a number of times, he climbs out of the dormitory window at night.

Once he runs straight out into the snow-covered fields, but is caught. As he runs, he loses his wooden clogs and rips his feet to bloody shreds on the frozen furrows; he leaves a long, dirty red trail behind on the polished planks of the floor when he is hauled back into the inmates’ dormitory.

Then the escape attempts cease.

And the boy remains at Råby for nearly five years.

In his diary, the Baron writes:

January 6, 1841.

Unyielding cold! But in good spirits.

On this past day we received, around noontime, our twelfth little criminal, who was delivered from Lund by the prison carriage, in a miserable state. Resulting from the chill in the carriage, as well as his quaking, the boy had become so exhausted that only with great effort could he remove himself. I allowed the coachman and two of the other lads carry him into the dormitory, upon which, after a certain amount of debacle, he could be scrubbed and laid in his bunk. We now set our hopes to the boy’s future salvation, this our little mischievous apostle number 12!!

Our childhood summers on Ramels Väg always unfolded in the same way. The buildings and streets first looked feeble under the burning sun, but then

you could see that there was still the tenacity of a rock inside, a weight to the stony motionlessness, greater than anything else, deep inside all the gray. I don't know if the city frightened me or if it was beyond fear, like a demand.

In the days when I was still alone with Marga, I would sit on the kitchen floor in the afternoons as she slept her unnatural sleep there on the corner sofa. Everything was different back then, somehow, not least that poisonous slumber. I quickly learned to register and monitor what happened before it took over, those long daylight hours with Marga in the apartment on Ramels Väg. Even back then, I had learned to look forward to her sleep, that half-death that, as if by magic, knocked her out like a machine coming to a standstill so I could return to my Barbie horse and the blue notebook and the story of Little Lupine on the kitchen floor, and the silence. Oftentimes I stood by the window and gazed at the grove of aspens at the edge of the field; the endless trembling of the great crowns' leaves, they looked like beading water or fish scales in the bright sunlight; in the distance the water tower rose above the field. If I opened the window, if the wind was right, I could hear the mighty rustling of the trees, how it grew stronger or shifted or faded away, but it always returned, a backdrop, an undertone. This was before I had begun to take B. out there. I preferred to observe the trees from a distance. I liked the aspens better when they still seemed just close enough, still concealing their core, still forming this seam, this border post, a verdant fish-scale wall erected around a secret center, an ambiguous opening.

Maybe I truly miss it, Marga's sleep back when I was a child, the abyss of unconsciousness that finally allowed me to be alone with the aspens, and free.

Later, as children do, B. would persist in saying that Marga was never really asleep. That's about the size of it. He said he had once walked right up to her as she was lying on the sofa, and noticed that her eyes weren't quite closed — he took this as an indication that she never truly abandoned us for

sleep but always, in some hazy way, remained conscious, that even though we didn't know it she observed us, guarded over us, in the apartment as we went around waiting for her to sit up the way she always did sooner or later, her eyes wide-open and bloodshot. Only to turn to us with her dull smile, slowly dragging herself up off the sofa, to put on a saucepan of hot chocolate drink as she handed us each a cookie spread with a thick layer of butter.

This solemnity and conviction in B. when he talked about things like Marga's sleep.

Crying gulls, Ramels Väg.

Children running or hiding between the buildings.

I lie in B's old bed with the Hemköp bag on my belly, reading through Endre's moth-eaten papers; the sun is already setting in the courtyard, shadows are moving swiftly and recklessly across the neighborhood playgrounds. Out in the kitchen, Marga is clinking the china, her shelves are clean now, blinding, unrecognizable. It's strange. Her endless activity in the apartment, this rearranging and cleaning and preparing fills me with mild discomfort, as before something foreign, an unannounced visit. Motes of dust waft down from the paper lamp above my head as an invisible draft suddenly sets it in motion. I sleep later in the mornings now, leaving the untouched room facing the courtyard only once Marga has left for her daily outings. I eat, once I'm alone, from the sweets in her pantry, which is clean and well-stocked. She has started to come check on me just before she leaves; she doesn't say anything in particular but I know what she wants, sometimes she just knocks and when I don't open the door or respond she eventually goes on her way. Sometimes I think I can hear her saying my name there on the other side of the door, quiet as a sigh or a barely audible gasp: *Sussi?* I don't reply; I merely listen as she snaps on her summer sandals out in the hall. She doesn't lock the door behind her, she leaves it open like a question or an invitation. I lie between the Superman sheets, which are slightly damp

against my skin, my own scent is slowly replacing B's. Once I'm sure she's gone I get up and lock the front door after her, and then I go to the kitchen to scan her shelves.

I won't follow her, I know what she wants, I was never planning to stay.

When she returns a few hours later, I'm in bed again, my back to the door; if the afternoon sun is too strong through the gaps in the ancient blinds, I hide my face behind the contents of Endre's bag. The brittle paper almost crumbles from my breath and sweat. Outside: the summer's wall of voices and sounds.

She leaves a door open for me; she wants me to come with her. Sometimes I hear her talking softly on the phone out on the balcony, only a few words reach me, her voice is shy. I lie motionless in the bed, under the paper lamp. From the courtyard I hear the sound of the rubber of the neighbor girls' sneakers as it whines against the asphalt in the chalked hopscotch grid down there, when I go out with B's rusty bike at night and they run back to their doors they look like darting pigeons in their white veils.

On occasion I bike out to the sea at dusk, I zig-zag through the network of streets, the chain hits my ankle bones and turns them oily and black and wounded, and the narrow boy's seat chafes between my legs. I bike past the old manor house where B. and I used to play, and then the school, before I turn toward downtown. Teenagers stand in groups at the bus stops at Södervärn, drinking Red Bull and smoking, I don't like their startled laughter. Then the darkening vault of the sky above the trees in Pildamm Park, the smooth surface of the pond under the impressive lights, the birds are sleeping along the park paths, their wings tucked close to their bodies. The closer I get to the sea, the quieter the streets are, nothing here is like the neighborhood around Ramels Väg where no one ever sleeps, the sea breeze ruffles my hair and my clothes, carrying the pervasive scent of seaweed. And then I'm there. I lean the bike against the fence alongside the overgrown

rails and walk down across the sand, to the water, the evening is already long gone and the sky is black as mud. The hoots of the night swimmers out on the dock, next to the lido, closed for the night. The waves swabbing the shore. On the other side of the dark strait, the blinking belt of lights: Copenhagen. I sit for a while and gaze out at the water. Then I walk back across the sand, damp with night, to Marga and the city and Ramels Väg.

The wolf distracts the Baron from everything else.

When his sons come home for a visit from the regiment in Malmö, their presence fills him with restlessness. It's early autumn, the pup might be around ten months old, at dinner he feels uncomfortable and preoccupied. He sends lengthy gazes out the dining room window, toward the avenue of lindens that leads to the stable, where he is keeping the pup in its box; he pokes at the slices of venison steak on his plate. He absent-mindedly scrapes the toe of his shoe across the irregularities in the herringbone parquet, counts the blue snails on the tile stove, then counts them again. After dinner, he sips his dessert liqueur in boredom; they've settled outside for a while in the evening sun. He feels Malin's gray eyes watching him from under her bonnet; the faint smell of horse from his sons' cavalry uniforms stings his nostrils.

Does he perceive, at some point, a shadow falling across Gustaf's face? He does perceive a shadow, a slight, almost imperceptible, weight. He sucks at his liqueur glass as he half-listens to his sons' reports on regiment life, and an old memory of Gustaf suddenly blooms inside him. The memory is from the time when Malin lay ill while she was expecting Fredric; Gustaf would be a few years old, and an alarming softness has already settled over him. The lad's cries when he is kept from his mother to allow her to rest in the closed bedroom cut and echo in the Baron through the manor walls, disturb him as he sits at the secretary desk upstairs in the evenings, trying to work. The fuss goes on for weeks; it becomes a torment. But after Fredric's birth,

the crying unexpectedly ceases. Gustaf now seems good-natured, or at least he refrains from fretting. Until the good-naturedness turns out to have merely been concealing something even more alarming. The nursemaid is the one who finds Gustaf dangling the cluster of dead baby mice over his little brother's cradle. "Cluster" — it truly appears so. He holds the clump of tiny, lame animals over his sleeping brother with both hands, his fists closed tightly around the horridly pink limbs, which he is still indecisively weighing over the cradle (the mother is later found caught in a trap next to the tile stove in the nursery, with only one of the babies still beside her, motionless and gray like a flake of ash, she must have been giving birth in the moment of her death). The nursemaid is shaken afterward and claims that the boy had such a strange expression on his face, and that it had frightened her. Her description of Gustaf's face lingers with the Baron like a troublesome question. He immediately, following the prank with the baby mice, closes himself in the nursery with the lad and the rod, and the procedure is repeated two or three times over the coming days. Further punishment is deemed unnecessary, and a sigh of relief is given when Gustaf at last acknowledges the offensiveness of his trick and the whole thing is forgotten.

At three junctures, however, the Baron is given reason to recall the incident with the mice. The second one, then, is during his sons' visit home from the regiment in Malmö, as he sips his liqueur and sneaks longing glances toward the stables, where the wolf is closed up, and a faint shadow crosses Gustaf's face above the buttoned collar of his uniform.

The first occurs several years earlier, when the children are home on holiday from the boarding school in Växjö. It's Easter; Gustaf is twelve or thirteen. He has seemed evasive since he arrived, spending hours sitting alone under the chestnut in back, or prowling around his mother in silence, always looking inward. When, on the day before Easter, they receive visitors for dinner—the ladies and gentlemen at Petersborg and a few acquaintances from Lund — Gustaf seems distracted and disinterested. He responds in

monosyllables, pushes the fried apples around his plate with his fork, but stops abruptly as Malin aims a pointed look at him from across the table, but he retains the same distant expression. Not even the hired chamber orchestra and the dance in the salon during the late supper seem to capture Gustaf's interest, he sits in the ball-claw chair under the crystal chandelier in a galling, shrunken position. As the Baron passes by, he gives the lad a mild kick in the shin to make him straighten up and stop disgracing them with his peculiar sluggishness. Gustaf whimpers at the kick but immediately sits up, then listlessly takes his mother by the hand and reluctantly dances the last quadrille with her.

The rest of the holiday passes in much the same way: Gustaf's absent-mindedness becomes a thorn in the side of the Baron. On one occasion, as they're about to ride out to shoot sandpipers for dinner and Gustaf suddenly stops short and delays them by dithering with the buttons of his coat instead of mounting his saddled horse, the Baron abruptly boils over and climbs off his own horse to give the boy a few cuffs to the ear. Gustaf's cheeks go angry red but his expression doesn't change. He merely gets into the saddle without a word and gives a dry click to set the horse in motion; the hunt is silent and effective. Misty spring sunshine, the strong scent of the ground. They spot a few storks sweeping over the fields with great, heavy wingbeats. Gustaf holds his tongue all the while but shoots two fine sandpipers. At dinner, the Baron studies him over the serving platter of the birds, glistening with fat; the boy's eyes rove about the room without settling on anything and the aimlessness of his expression fills the Baron with boundless irritation.

At last, on one of the last days, he approaches Gustaf after pressure from Malin to ask how he is truly feeling. It's early evening, Gustaf is sitting on the back stairs, bent over a whittling knife and a half-finished bark boat; he gives a start at his father's question as if he hadn't heard him approach. Then he gazes up for a moment, his expression irresolute or fearful or something

darker, more ambiguous, hostile, perhaps. The Baron has a difficult time determining the species of expression, but the image of the baby mice flits through him before he pushes it away — the boy's grimace vanishes as quickly as it appeared and his face regains its composure as he swears that he is fine, *and why do you ask, Father?*

Had he truly driven the strangeness out of Gustaf with the rod?

He sips his punch, he perceives a shadow, he chooses to ignore the flash of hostility in Gustaf's eyes.

Once the pup has been settled in the stall, he often sits at the ebony desk next to the open window. At first he can hear, in the distance, how it whimpers and barks a little out in the stables, and he immediately rushes down through the avenue of lindens with a marrow bone for it, sits in the stall with it for a while. It yelps joyfully when he comes, and falls asleep against his thigh after its meal, its head leaning back, its throat exposed. The pup's trust makes him feel mushy and warm in the head; he loves these moments in the stall as it sleeps so vulnerably. His hand measures the pup's ribcage; he could still destroy it with a single stomp of his boot. He often sits there for quite some time, listening to the snuffling puppy breaths before he gently lifts the sleeping head and lays it on the stall floor. Then he returns to his desk, the lindens rustling mildly around him in the evening breeze. As he reaches the top of the stone steps, in his stocking feet after having scraped his boots against the threshold in the entry, Malin is sitting over her embroidery in the velvet sofa in the salon, her mink around her shoulders although there are still coals burning in the tile stove. In the faint candlelight, her unruly coiffure appears to be part of the stormy sea of the Beauvais tapestry above her head; she looks up at him, across the room, with her gray eyes, doesn't say anything — thin, pursed lips? He sends a lame nod in her direction and attempts a small, forced smile as he crosses the salon to

the corner room; every time his heels strike the parquet the English porcelain clatters in the vitrine.

He allows himself to be filled up by this wolf, as by nothing else.

There is a momentary flash, a connection, between the capture of the wolf and his later weakness for the boy.

He is working intensely with the wolf when the news of Gustaf reaches Björnstorp. 1828, autumn. He has the wolf on a long line with a noose of wire rope at one end. They're practicing in the lamb pasture, which he has had emptied for the occasion; he is wearing only his shirt and the pale red vest with no scarf, and his tall boots are turned down to his ankles. He corrects the wolf's movements with the aid of short, sharp jerks that make it whimper, first in surprise and later in confusion; he is quick to praise it and allow it to approach him for a bit of raw pork he stores in pouch on his belt. The wolf is very obedient and learns quickly; afterward he sits in the stall with it and bathes the groove the noose has cut into the skin of its throat, thin as a blood-red stroke of a pen. The wolf licks at his hands and fingers, then falls asleep next to him in the stall. When he leaves the stable, the October sky is still deep blue above the lindens.

The seal on the correspondence that awaits him on the desk belongs to the Crown Prince; the hussar regiment has sent word that young officer Carl Gustaf Gyllenkrok has been relieved of his post effective immediately on the grounds that, in order to pay off a gambling debt, he stole one thousand five hundred Riksdaler from the regiment's purse.

That winter he must travel back and forth between Malmö and Stockholm thanks to the protracted consequences of Gustaf's theft. He sits behind the drawn curtain in the cab; he avoids stepping out at the inns and horse-changing stops during the daytime and commands the coachman to stop as late as possible at the nighttime lodgings in order to avoid encountering other people as they put up. He smokes in the cab although it makes him

feel ill, he draws the black sheepskin tighter around himself. Each time it stops snowing, he can hear the driver and the gate boy singing and chatting up there on the seat, their voices sound tinny and disjointed. The carriage jolts violently, there's no way he can read and he clenches his teeth with hatred, his smallest toes feel numb with cold inside his boots. At times the sun sparkles against the snow-covered landscape, outside the carriage window, blinding him.

The disgrace is an inescapable fact now; he can feel it in the way he is observed with sympathy or met by evasive glances when he steps out of the cab near the hussar quarters in Malmö. When he returns to the carriage after conducting his errand, and lights his pipe, his mind sees a scorching image of the wolf sitting in the pasture, patiently waiting for its small reward of pork. He sleeps poorly at the hotel and gets up in the middle of the night to wake his driver, who takes him to the usual madam's behind Lilla Torg. Yellow lights streams from the beer cafes in the alley; the girl that comes to his room is young and round and moves stiffly, but she is clean enough. Her white buttocks strike his groin dully, mechanically; the candelabra on the nightstand spreads a sooty odor throughout the room, at the moment of orgasm he joylessly grabs the long, mousy braid at her nape.

Between his journeys, he works with the wolf as much as possible, but he notes that it has already begun to balk and turn away from him. He informs Malin that it is of the utmost importance for the wolf to spend time among people, but when he is away from the manor house she can't convince any of the servants to come near it.

At his final visit to the regiment in Malmö, just before he sees to it that Gustaf leaves the country and relinquishes the name of Gyllenkrok to avoid further scandals, he is struck by the odor of unwashed male bodies when he steps into the dim regiment office. When Gustaf looks up at him from the wooden bench along one wall, he sees that his son still resembles Malin to

an astonishing degree. Those alluringly soft lips — the Baron has to turn away to keep from meeting his naked gaze. He deals briefly with what he has to take care of while Gustaf remains silent all the while, his eyelids remain lowered throughout the discussion, his body looks shrunken on the long bench, his forehead glistens with sweat. When the Baron rises to leave and asks the guard to let him out, he suddenly feels hot and overwhelmed with rage, out of the corner of his eye he can see Gustaf lift his eyes to look at him, sitting off to the side with his face half illuminated, and he perceives a traitorous gleam in the boy's gray eyes as the memory of the baby mice flashes through him for a third time. He raps firmly at the door, he steps into the narrow regiment corridor. When he arrives home at Björnstorp later that day, Malin is sitting in the armchair in the bay window upstairs, she doesn't turn around as he walks by her on his way to his office. Her flaxen hair, peeking over the back of the chair, looks unkempt and greasy, he closes the door behind him with a click. They never see Gustaf again. What is left behind is only the wolf, and ultimately, too, the boy.

After the wolf has killed a peacock, it takes down a horse and a pig. Then he lets it move out to the courtyard, like a watchdog; it is no longer allowed to sleep in the stall or run loose in the empty lamb pasture. The wolf is now a year and a half old, and very strong. It is chained to a substantial wooden pole driven deep into the ground. He stands with the wolf's head inclined against him, gazing over the fields that spread out behind the stables under a crystal-clear sky. The wolf pants lightly and lets him scratch it behind its grizzled ear. As he starts up along the avenue of lindens, heading for the manor house, he hears it behind him, whining and tugging at its chain; its movements grow fiercer the closer he gets to the front door.

Later, the wolf's distant cries keep him awake all night. Malin is lying beside him, her back to him, and at times it seems that she is sobbing gently

or perhaps shaking, he isn't sure. When the wolf finally quiets, he falls asleep and dreams that he's sleeping in the stall with it, a wonderful, easy slumber.

In the last of his entries, alone in his old age in Lund:

I would like to tell you, about the Creature: In my dreams, I always rescue him.

The wolf serves as the manor's watchdog for only a short time.

Then it gets loose and bites a young farmhand in the thigh, severely; the farmhand gets away at the last second and manages to climb through one of the stable windows and into a stall.

It's afternoon, almost evening; the farmworkers cluster near the paddock, keeping their distance from the wolf. Who trots back and forth outside the stall where the farmhand fled. The young man's broken cries for help echo up against the fine June sky, it has just rained, magpies or rooks in the trees. The Baron stands motionless under the lindens for a moment, watching from a distance the wolf's anxious zig-zag path in the straw-strewn mud outside the stable; he can't make out its eyes or its expression, it's too far away. Then he walks the last bit down to the end of the avenue before turning toward the stable, and the wolf stops short when it sees him. It hesitates for an instant, and then starts for him with his ears down in submission, his tail wagging in trust, until he is close enough to put the bullet right between his yellow eyes.

RAPTURE

The house is built on a plot of land the Baron had purchased near Stora Råby. The heavy bricks, a gift from King Karl Johan to the new reformatory, are shipped in batches from Malmö. The grounds consist of six acres of earth, a third of which are pasture and a third meadow, where a swimming bath is planned for the health and cleanliness of the boys. The remaining third is higher land, where the institution building will be constructed, with gardens surrounding.

He has seventy fruit trees planted, as well as many berry bushes, he tells the architect to add a clock tower to the drawings of the main building, like a small, watchful eye, or a scolding finger, and each day he follows the work on site. He gets up early in the morning and takes his tea in the writing room; below the window, in the manor park, mist rises from the grass around the boxwood balls. Sometimes he sees Malin down there in her blue velvet suit and hunting hat, returning from her morning ride through the lindens on her white gelding, her face hidden under the brim, only the narrow slit of her lips visible, her strained expression. After the tea he goes down to hitch up the chestnut and climbs into the s Surrey to leave for Råby, down the willow avenues and oak groves that adjoin the properties. From a distance he can see the Boys' Home outlined against the fields, the surrounding flat land makes the building visible from all directions and he feels a warm, billowing sensation inside. Later, when everything is ready and the operation, as he puts it in his diary, "flourishes," he will, upon his arrivals to the Boys' Home, see the boys running to meet him when he drives the s Surrey the last bit up to the gardens.

In his diary, he writes:

April 3, 1839.

It is a true delight to me, to behold the building at Råby, which within the very near future will likely be complete as regards its exterior. Visible as it is from a great distance, from the plains, it sends a friendly invitation to all, and offers mercy for the Unfortunate. Our work on behalf of the Misguided children makes great strides forward!!

He often walks, during the construction, at the edge of the field, near the apple orchard, with Kahl. Their procedure is thus: he speaks what is on his mind, he makes circuitous associations, which Kahl then transforms and embellishes upon. Kahl has with him a notebook; now and then he asks the Baron to stop for a moment while he props the little book against a tree and writes, his hands moving eagerly. When their walk is over, Kahl reads his work aloud to the Baron as they sit on a stack of bricks and gaze out at the rapeseed field that extends along the building site; it is dotted with poppies that look like glowing drops of blood in the sea of yellow. He puffs on his meerschaum pipe as he listens; Kahl's arguments are lofty, pithy, persuasive. Once the entries are copied cleanly, Kahl shows them to him one last time, then sends them off to prospective patrons around the county, to *Lunds Weckoblad*, sometimes even to the Stockholm papers.

They walk in the apple orchard; they sit before the rapeseed; together they form opinions.

Kahl, 1840:

In the most fertile and populous region of the Skåne plains, where the division of owned land among sons has to an extreme degree accelerated the rate of hasty marriages, and in an area where the depravity of two garrison cities located within close proximity leaves behind a greater number of morally reckless children than the more northerly and sparsely populated areas of Sweden have to apologize for — is

being erected the Correctional Institution that means to come to the rescue of the Delinquent. Here will be made ready space for a dozen boys of the proletarian class from all around the province of Skåne. By receiving these Wayward Children into a domestic circle, by instilling in them the necessary knowledge of Christianity and teaching them all manner of craftsmanship and handiwork as well as occupying them with agricultural and horticultural activities, they shall be saved from their depraved Fate and in this way incorporated into Society. Thus shall they grow accustomed to industriousness and to love, for their benefactors, in a word: be shown Life from the brighter viewpoint that must always remain Foreign to those in idleness and adversity. It is our conviction, that the most delinquent Child, after just three to five years at our Institute, will come to be improved and instilled with understanding of the difference between order and a life of misadventure, that he will thereafter have the benefit of full civic freedoms and rights. But if these young and neglected seedlings are, in any great number, to grow and bear fruit, we must also, with our own hands, water their roots. Only thus can our little greenhouse be of help to greater Society, so that our actions shall not fall fruitless to the earth, but anchor in the present time, and shoot forth into the future like producing trees.

By the end of the year, eleven boys ranging in age from nine to sixteen have found a home at Råby. They are quartered in the dormitory. The Baron, who by now has given up his chairmanship on the board of the hospital to become the full-time trustee of the Home, stands alongside the institute staff to personally receive each child as he arrives from Malmö, Lund, Landskrona.

The children are assigned the numbers 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, and 11.

Their hair is shorn with sheep-shearing scissors to minimize lice and promote good hygiene.

Then they are put to work in the gardens and workshops. They are dressed in gray wadmål, rough linen shirts, clogs for work and leather shoes

for Sunday — they sew and mend their garments themselves, as their proficiency in tailoring and shoemaking develop. The documents state that the children “often derive pleasure from spending even their free hours in wholesome enterprise.”

THE FACE OF THE CARP

The boy arrives at Råby in 1840; he is the Institute's twelfth student. He arrives just before dinnertime in the prison carriage from Lund; it's a Wednesday, raw and damp January cold, a bone-white sky.

The Baron stands at the window in the writing room for a long time that morning, waiting as the caretakers clear snow from around the sleigh, the lindens speckled and bare along the avenue. He has time to refill his meerschaum pipe twice over as he waits, he eats more almond cookies, he dozes for a while in the reading chair. Later the maid comes up to announce that the sleigh is ready. No wind, the opaque sky seems somehow illuminated from the inside by a distant light, he pulls the sheepskin closer around himself.

He arrives at the same time as the prison carriage, steps out of the sleigh on the drive and approaches the young constable — the boy's escort, who is arguing with the supervisor of the Home next to the open door of the carriage with its sled runners. Over the constable's shoulder he spots the boy, curled up inside the dim carriage; he looks like a dirty little monkey. At first the boy seems unconscious, but when the supervisor and the caretaker lift him out of cab he suddenly flails and blinks at the white daylight in confusion before opening his eyes wide; unexpectedly he meets the gaze of the Baron where he stands alongside the cab. His eyes are strangely bright under his matted, reddish hair, and a few flecks of yellow around the ringed iris make the color look like amber: his eyes cause the Baron to be startled, delaying his ability to order the men to carry the boy into the dormitory immediately. The boy's eyelids are closed once again when he is placed on the bed, the twelfth in the room, situated next to the side window. His whole

body is trembling and a faint, almost melodic whimper begins to rise from the boy, who still hasn't opened his eyes. The Baron can see now that he not dressed warmly enough for the season; he seems chilled. The other inmates, who have been staring at the exhausted newcomer, are sent back out to work while water is warmed on the woodstove in the farm kitchen so a bath can be drawn for the new arrival. No one knows whether the boy is asleep or awake, the strange behavior of quiet moaning continues, the sound emanates from him uninterrupted, rising and falling unpleasantly, and at last the supervisor commands him sharply to quit his crowing. Which doesn't happen: the boy sounds like an animal or a lunatic. The supervisor approaches his bed with a few long strides and slaps his face a few times; the boy's eyes still don't open, but his complaints cease for a few seconds. Only to begin again at once. The supervisor and the caretaker exchange perplexed glances, then look at the Baron, behind them, who still hasn't said anything, and then they lift the whimpering boy by his arms and stand him on the floor — when they try to release him he crumples until they manage, by sheer reflex, to catch him as he falls. His face is smooth; the Baron stands in the door with his meerschaum pipe in the corner of his mouth, feeling peculiar, shivering. Then he obligingly moves aside for the supervisor and caretaker as they pass by, dragging the boy to the kitchen. The boy's eyes have been closed all the while; his body alternates between going slack and shaking. The whimpers come in starts from between his clenched jaws until he is undressed and sunk into the warm water. Then he suddenly opens his eyes again and a wild gaze, glistening with fear, radiates from his face as he begins to mill his arms and legs with a surprising strength, like a drowning man. The caretakers, now drenched by the water that splashes about the boy in the tub, tries for a moment to hold the boy down on his own before the supervisor's blows whine through the air and strike the boy in the face, at which he finally drops off and goes still. The now unconscious body is held upright in the tub as he is scrubbed and shorn; his loose little neck causes

the heavy head to fall to the side, making him resemble a corpse. Three men are involved in the remarkable bath; a string of blood-red snot swings back and forth from the boy's nose before it finally lets go and floats on the water like a glistening snake. Later he is dried off and dressed, still stupefied, and placed in his bed under the blanket.

The next morning, the boy is already missing.

But he does not get far.

There has been a thaw overnight, and the landscape is gray and patchy. After only twenty meters the boy is discovered, by the driver who had delivered goods to the Home from Lund earlier that morning, under the straw in the goods cart. The boy tries, upon being discovered, to jump from the cart but is stopped by the driver, after which the caretaker rushes over and carries him back into the building.

Nor does the boy manage to escape during his second attempt a few days later. His bed is found empty in the morning once again, but after a short while he is found sleeping in the toolshed, apparently still too weak to have made it any farther.

The boy sits at the end of the long table in the farm kitchen, bringing the ladle of bread soup to his lips slowly at first, and then with increasing vigor; the Baron catches a glimpse of the hungry little face in the window as he walks toward the schoolhouse among the flock of boys on their way to the day's lessons. The boy's freshly shorn scalp gleams in the light from the ceiling lantern. An absent or apathetic expression, lowered eyelids.

In his subsequent escape attempts, during the next few weeks, the boy is stronger, and the Baron is secretly impressed by his perseverance. The boy still hasn't made a peep, aside from the strange whimpering at his arrival, and he has been dealt innumerable blows for his silence. He sits with his back straight, staring out the window during mealtimes and lessons, he still

won't respond when addressed, the Baron can see now that the boy's face is covered in tiny, almost imperceptible freckles.

When he arrives home to Björnstorp for the evening meal, he sits in front of the fireplace for a long time after the dessert liqueur, smoking his pipe and writing in his diary. Afterward he sleeps restlessly in the room with the lily wallpaper. Has he already begun to dream about the boy?

He is informed the next day that the boy ran away again, but his fellow inmates have agreed, for a price, to keep him from climbing out the bedroom window.

Each morning the boy walks in his garments of shame across the courtyard to the basketry; he obediently braids the thick ropes of rattan, which he quickly learns to handle. Then, at night, he is prevented from fleeing. He still doesn't speak. Instead he allows his thin fingers to be struck by the ferule again and again, punishment for his silence.

Weeks pass.

Until one afternoon when the boy suddenly deviates from the group of inmates in the courtyard, in broad daylight, as they are bringing in goods from Lund; he dashes right out across the field. The boy is quick — for a moment the Baron watches the skinny little body dart diagonally across the black furrows, but then the supervisor catches up with him and, with his flailing arms pinned to his body — he is surprisingly strong despite his slight frame — he is carried back to the farm. The Baron notes the direction the boy so purposefully took: did he think he could run all the way to Malmö? Boys number 2 and 7 are ordered to go into the field and find the wooden clogs dropped by the little runaway during his escape attempt. The boy himself, once again dressed in the garments of shame, is made to mop up the dirty streaks of blood he left on the plank floor.

The boy, who will soon come to be considered a particularly difficult case, won't leave the Baron's thoughts: inside him he carries the image of the amber gaze at the boy's arrival, like a daydream, a pale apprehension. He

rises earlier and earlier in the dawn, spends long periods sitting at the ebony desk in the writing room and staring out at the plains that open north of the manor park; from a distance he sees the pale napes of the milkmaids under their bonnets as they slip, all in a row, into the barn. Misty veils of morning fog over the bushes.

After the final escape attempt, he finally brings the boy to Björnstorp. He places the sheepskin over the boy's bony shoulders himself, as the sleigh pulls away from Råby. The boy doesn't say a word during the journey, his cheeks a bit rounder now under the golden eyelashes that adorn his lowered eyelids. Only once does the boy look up, when the Baron hands him a crust of raisin bread he brought for him, he doesn't know if the cold-bitten little face is expressing surprise or suspicion. The hasty glance lasts only a second, but is long enough to set something afire in his belly. Then they arrive at the manor, and a light, powdery snow falls over the crown of the boy's head as they step out of the sled before the manor house door.

He keeps the boy at the manor for almost a week. He tells himself it is of the utmost important that no great failures involving the inmates occur during the Home's trial period; the operation must prove itself to be particularly fruitful now, in this initial, critical stage. So he brings the boy home with him. Gives him, in the sleigh as the snow whirls around the runners and the steam rises from the horses' backs, in exchange for that amber gaze, a piece of raisin bread.

He allows the boy to sleep in the farmhands' quarters with a watchdog outside. The first night he wakes up to what he thinks is the sound of the dog barking, and he rushes out in his nightdress, his overcoat hastily thrown over his shoulders, but when he approaches, the dog only looks up at him in surprise from its spot at the door.

He makes sure that the boy eats in the farm kitchen with the kitchen maids; he arranges for him to get baths. He feels Malin watching them from the sofa in the salon, where she sits with her game of solitaire as, on the very

first day, he leads the boy through the house and up to the Chinese cabinet and his specimen collection behind the writing room. Does he intend to talk to the boy through the animals?

At first the boy seems as distant as before, but something passes across his face as the Baron stands him before the formaldehyde jars of vertebrates he has arranged in long rows on the tall shelves. At one point the boy unexpectedly raises a hand and runs a finger across the glass jars of turbellaria and Nepalese snakes. The Baron pretends not to care about the boy's silence. He lets him be, but gently instructs him about the corals and centipedes and reptiles in the jars he lifts down from their shelves so the boy can study them at close range. He gives him a pair of velvet gloves before he lets him feel the beaks of the stuffed hummingbirds. The boy stops for an extended period in front of the container with the Chinese carp. When the Baron realizes that the peculiar animal in the pale yellow preservative fluid has caught the boy's interest, he tells him that the fish is a rarity, an anomaly, that the double set of nostrils, eyes, and unnaturally wide lips are a sign that the carp was likely once a twinned egg that didn't have time to separate in the mass of roe, and that it now carries its sibling's face within its own.

The boy listens to the Baron's lesson without speaking, but apparently with attention, later the Baron will feel that he was perfectly alert and approachable, which spurs him to allow the boy to eat at the dining room table with him, and Malin. At first the boy looks frightened by the situation, slowly eating his portion of the grilled dove as if he had a ball of glass in his mouth. After the meal the Baron gives him an extra blanket for the bed he has been assigned in the farmhands' quarters; he follows the boy out as evening falls. The snow crunches under their feet as they cross the yard and the lantern casts a flickering glow over the trunks of the lindens. Before the boy slips past the watchdog and in through the door, the Baron pats him on the head.

He sleeps restlessly, he realizes that his capers with the boy are risky, but the amber gaze has already lit a spark within him and he can't help himself.

In the diary, he writes:

Boy no. 12 now behaves irreproachably and has capitulated! I have freed him from the shaming garments and he is no longer under watch or guard. I am inclined to believe, that he no longer aims to escape. May this Wild Boy henceforth allow himself to be corrected and improved at our Institute, for otherwise Gallows Hill will surely be his final resting place!

Each morning during the following days, he instructs the boy about the animals as the boy listens eagerly; the responses provoked by the Baron's attempts at conversation are curt, but at least they are responses. At one juncture, he asks the boy which of his names he is called by, Johan or Petrus. Petrus, the boy says, after a moment's hesitation, and the Baron hands him a small brown notebook in which he teaches the boy to write his name. The letters he forms are extremely clumsy at first, but the boy is surprisingly quick to learn, and then he writes his name with ever greater ease, filling page after page of the book. Afterwards the Baron gives him an almond cookie, which the boy eats in silence on the Gustavian sofa without leaving a crumb.

When the Baron must travel to Lund for a meeting with the board members, he leaves the boy alone with Malin. Upon his return he finds them in the furniture before the rococo tile stove in the salon, Malin reading aloud from the old worn book of fairytales he hasn't seen her take out since the children were small. The boy: sitting solemnly, on the very edge of the sofa, as if he were sitting on glass, his hands folded in his lap.

He allows the boy to stay until Monday.

Then he has the sleigh brought out so he can be driven back to Råby.

When he instructs him to get ready for the journey, the boy suddenly asks if he can see the carp one last time. The Baron hesitates at first, but then follows him upstairs to the specimen collection.

The boy stands before the formaldehyde container for a long time, studying the animal. The two pairs of eyes staring at him expressionlessly from the great fish body, through the yellow liquid, appear to be fixed on something far off.

Then he turns to the Baron with a thank you and a bow, and allows himself to be led down to the sleigh and transported back to Råby.

These three images: first the boy as he runs across the frozen fields during his last attempt to flee, apparently in the direction of Malmö.

Then the carp, with its sibling's face mixed into its own.

And the name, Petrus, which he writes neatly in his notebook, over and over.

We didn't like other children, B. and me. We liked Endre. Why would we need anyone else, besides ourselves? Not to mention, we were far too involved in the watching over of Marga, which was our life. Sure, there were brief episodes when I spent time with some of the children at my school in spite of this, but only if there was something in particular I thought I could get out of them. For example, the boys from the other class in my grade were the ones who showed me how to smoke and roll cigarettes, and later, how to play Oven.

I bike faster through the summer nights now, the wind tossing my hair about and striking my face; I've grown used to the narrow boy's seat and it doesn't hurt anymore. When I feel the phone vibrating in my breast pocket of B's old shirts, which I wear every day now, I brake and sit down on a bench or in a bus stop and let Endre babble on or say nothing and just sigh on the other end of the line, as the night traffic glides by like schools of fish

or slow packs of predators. I no longer know what I'm doing here. When I come home from my nightly rides and tumble into bed in the old teenager room I can hear Marga putting on the morning coffee in the kitchen. After a few hours of sleep I wake up to the sound of her pottering around in the hall, and then she stands on the other side of the door just as she always does before she leaves. She whispers or exhales my name, like a question or a plea. I lie still with the sheets cast aside, it's too hot, it's already stuffy in the room, I'm wearing B's old boxer shorts, I'm waiting for her to go. At last she gives up and takes the few steps from the bedroom door to the front door, through the entryway. She doesn't lock the door behind her, the stubbornness of this daily recurrence annoys me, I no longer feel like getting up and turning the lock after her, I let her go. Then just the voices of the children down in the courtyard, the front door of the building closing. The heat, like a wall against the window. I take my coffee to the balcony, a few kids are running across the field out there, playing tag or something more violent, they're chasing each other or being chased, I can't interpret their games, when they become too monotonous I go back inside and write.

I think it was around the time that Cunt had started coming to our house in the afternoons to clean and to bribe us with strawberry fool just so she could sit there and interrogate us at the kitchen table about our life with Marga, when I suddenly, out of the blue, realized everything could one day be taken from me. That was when I started watching over B. anew, in a more purposeful way, I would stand in the window and peer down at him and Endre as they sat in the sandbox or played with their sticks and old racecars in the puddles in the courtyard, in the morning, before we went to school I checked to make sure that his face was clean and his hair combed. We had just begun first and sixth grades, I wasn't taking chances with anything about his appearance, I made sure his mittens were on, and his hat, and matching socks, and that his face was clean. But soon a new problem popped up, one that had started on the nights with Poodle, when B. would piss the

bed and I always had to make sure to have fresh sheets on hand in my room. Then he took the problem with him to school, he would sit at his desk with the puddle growing beneath him and the teacher would have to call home and make Marga come get him. Later, in the freetime room, I noticed how she began to circle me and B, the teacher, as if she were searching our faces and movements for something that would reveal us, and I thought again that it was only a matter of time before I would be on my own again. Then I started forcing him to wear the giant overnight menstrual pads I bought with my weekly allowance at the grocery store at RoCent, the same procedure each morning and under protest from B. at first, but when I shouted and threatened him with what might happen if he kept bungling things like that and didn't do as I said, he stopped arguing and let me put some extra pads in the Hello Kitty backpack he'd inherited from me, while I instructed him in how to change them at recess. And B. sat in the classroom like before, only now it wasn't dripping from his seat like it had done. In time, the teacher probably forgot all about it, and about us, and her gaze was drawn to someone else there in the freetime room. And the children moved in packs across the schoolyard, like clouds or the shadows of birds streaking endlessly across the asphalt and the plaster façade. This was around the same time I began to visit the aspens, with B.

The first time we went there it was a Saturday, while Marga was lying silently and shivering in the corner sofa under the blanket with her back to us and the TV on. I put on his down coat and pulled up his hood and walked down to the courtyard with him so he could get a change of scenery and some fresh air. It was fall, and for once the courtyard was totally silent and deserted. The lights were on in Endre's dad's place in the building across from us, in the kitchen, where he let us sit when things got too messy at Marga's and drink cold soda he bought cheap on the Copenhagen boats — sometimes we got to sleep on the two mattresses in Endre's older brothers' rooms, which

were untouched since they'd moved out and started engineering school somewhere else. I let B. sit on the edge of the sandbox with his Gameboy for a while, in the crystal-clear October air, but when a long time had passed and it didn't seem like Endre would show up I got the sudden idea to take him to the aspens. By that time he didn't hold my hand anymore, but I nudged him with the toe of my sneaker and signaled at him to follow me. We walked around the building, since it was Saturday Ramels Väg was empty and sleepy, birds in the trees, we crossed the street and walked across the field. Soon we were at the aspens. I took him by the hand anyway, as I lifted a branch with my other hand, and suddenly we were standing in the middle of a haven.

We would return there often that fall and winter and spring, until I told him we had to stop. By then it was too late. I had already gotten him to start collecting treasures there in the grove, in the form of silver-painted chestnuts and parts of old toys and bottles and junk we found in the neighborhood, turning it into a little room there among the trees, where a person could hide. It was in that room where I also showed him how to play Oven by putting Marga's lighter up to one nostril while squeezing the other shut, and letting the gas flow until your eyes gleamed and your nose ran, and you laughed until you couldn't breathe.

Later, when I told him I didn't want to go there anymore, that there were no fucking secrets out there anymore, that I had just lied and made it all up, and if he thought it was possible to hide behind the aspens he was wrong — he just went silent and looked at me, curiously or hesitantly. And I knew he wouldn't obey me and stop going there even though I asked him to and it was already too late, that this thing that had been lying in wait inside him, ready to sprout, waiting for those moments behind the aspens with me and the Oven, a readiness, had been released and could never be put back. Later I would often find him and Endre behind the aspens when I came home from school, they would be lying on the old horse blanket I had taken

somewhere, grinning and peering up at me with their goofy eyes even though I shouted and kicked them in the shins and feet to make them get up, and when I began to stand watch and wait for them, they just found other spots I didn't know about.

I spent many years looking for Endre and B. around the Herrgård neighborhood, and later, farther away. But it all started at the aspens.

I took him by the hand, I lifted away the branches.

And the foliage closed around us, the tiny round aspen leaves with their finely serrated edges, which the wind made rustle and tremble like a great, singing wall of fish scales. Above our heads, the sky, it was blue, the line left by a plane, a few birds. And I let go of his hand.