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*Willows*

translated from the Slovene by Gregor Timothy Čeh

Willows

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In my early memories all the images of my first encounter with willows are in yellowish-brown hues. Not, however, as faded photographs in old albums – what brought them about was a thaw at the end of some distant winter. A yellow-grey sky and the melting snow in large yellow patches, all the rest in lighter or darker tones of brown. Despite the sudden warmer weather in February which brought dampness and mud, the snow in the fields persisted. After Sunday lunch at our grandparents’, we went for a walk down the village road, through fields and pastures. In later years I grew to hate these long walks after Sunday family lunch because they were terribly boring but that late winter I was still a small boy, there was snow outside, and the sledge was waiting for me. Mother ran after me to put on my hat and gloves, buttoning up my chequered coat before she finally let me go. It must have been one of those particularly neat children’s coats with a large collar and patch pockets, similar to those worn by adult men at the time. Only that on me it looked as if I had a half-open umbrella pulled across my head. Not that I cared. My adolescent uncle pulled along the sledge and zig-zagged it through the snowy slush with muddy molehills peeping through in places. I held onto its wooden frame as tightly as I could, shrieking with delight. On the sharper turns I mostly fell into the wet snow but quickly climbed back, the sledge not waiting long. This game would have gone on forever had I not spotted some low, stocky trees. From afar they looked like black, hunchbacked men with yellow withies sprouting out of their heads. Bristly giants turned to stone, standing on the banks, thoughtfully gazing into the frozen pond.

 I stopped, fell silent, and started crying quietly. Mother didn’t understand. She probably thought that my foot had been caught under the sledge blade and gave my unfortunate uncle who was not at all to blame a nasty look. She picked me up so I no longer had to look at those horrible monsters waiting for spring, deep in thought.

 Upon the remnants of forgotten fears grew first a curiosity and later an admiration for these trees. I liked seeing them, bending across pools and fishponds, spreading along the stony embankments of nearby rivers or spreading across scree high up in the mountains.

 Before the end of winter, I planted some around the frog pond so their roots might stabilise its banks. To look at, the cuttings were just dead sticks, without roots or branches and without any signs that would indicate they contained any remnants of life. I stuck them into the wet ground, softened in the mild morning warmth in the spots where the wind had blown away the snow.

 It was the time of year when amphibians begin awakening. After long months of sleep in icy stupor, the scent of thawing soil awakes them like an aromatic morning coffee. I also enjoyed stomping around in rubber boots on the patches of bare, damp earth. Every animal, tailless or betailed, that had survived the winter was now crawling out of its still semi-frozen dwelling and joining the festival of spring. After a winter-long night of fasting, salamanders and agile frogs were crawling to forest pools and the occasional frog pond. Rolling in the same direction were fat toads, still too frozen to be capable of anything more than their clumsy hop. This was a morning paean of joy, bustling with enthusiasm over the new world that was becoming more fragrant by the moment, warmer and more colourful.

 The willow cuttings were also waiting for the soil to get its breath of dampness and beneath the dead grass things began to stir. That was also when my sticks awoke, sprouted roots and grew into the bank. No other tree had such a will for life. In the time between the full moons leaves began to bud. By the beginning of summer the growth was so vigorous that nobody would recognise the young trees as the lifeless sticks pushed into the cold ground.

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The throbbing heat of the early August afternoon did not allow any kind of movement. It pressed persistently until all life stopped and even thoughts came to a standstill. Only the grasshoppers tirelessly persevered. They chirped all afternoon as if the chirping was protecting them from being baked in the hot air just above the surface of the scorched grass. Only well into the evening did the heat abate, providing some respite.

 I went down to see my willow trees on the banks of the frog pond. First I sat, then soon lay in the grass. Tired, without any real strength, I looked at my young trees and listened to the still-warm ground. Time flowed very slowly. In the meantime, the willows grew vigorously. Their roots covered me, enveloped me and pushed my one side into the soil while my other side was observing the sky and the warm, dwindling pool with frogs, diving beetles and striders. With one ear I listened to crickets digging out their underground burrows, with the other their chirping outside the entrances to their holes. Earthworms too rustled pleasantly. I could listen to them devouring the soil.

 I hadn’t imagined just how many animals fed on soil. I must admit that initially their behaviour seemed terrible and repulsed me. It was so unusual and different. I had once read some advice by an elderly lady (a distant cousin of mine) referring to the *Great Wormhole Challenge*. Apparently it is something we can come across in our later years and may change the course of our life entirely. Understandably, without thinking about it too much, I took up this unique challenge and at the same time faced a bizarre demand: I should, from then on, live in a dark round pantry only as big as I can nibble out for myself! But the burrowing was so irresistibly inviting. I closed the eye still facing the sky and no longer listened to the rustling in the grass. Now I too began swallowing tiny bits of soil. Corridors became my home, endless corridors I had to eat out myself. The destination was unimportant, my journey was my food. Whenever I came across hard, tasteless clay, I simply turned around, looking for soft soil in a fresh direction. It brought me great satisfaction in the darkness of the badly ventilated underground burrows.

All the other annelids moved with incredible elegance through the stuffy passages. With their sparse but tough bristles on either side of their bodies, they pushed against the walls of the tunnels and, anchoring their head firmly, pulled the back end of their body towards it. Tensing their abdomen, they thrust their bristles into the wall and pushed the head forward. They did this with a particular swiftness when they had to disappear in the face of danger or when they went down the wrong hole. I could only move through the soil as fast as I could eat my way through it. Unshaven, I tried to climb through existing tunnels but my bristles are not particularly suitable for this kind of movement and I didn’t get very far. My otherwise well hirsute chest and shoulders totally failed me. I admit that, comparing myself to the elegant oligochaetes and their steady undulation through underground wormholes, I felt deprived and disabled.

An earthworm rarely meets another earthworm, so I was particularly happy of the unusual acquaintance with someone who was quite a character even in this underground world. I would never have thought that fate might intend such a bizarre path in the life of an earthworm. As with all unusual life stories, his too was a combination of circumstances and a peculiar love affair that my acquaintance had become involved in. With earthworms every individual carries within them a male part and a female part, so that one day they will become both father and mother. And that is not all. Sometimes it happens that one animal can become two. My new friend was once chopped in half by a hoe and when the two halves grew into new animals, something highly unusual happened. The two earthworm halves that lived entirely separate lives, actually met. After a brief ceremony of checking each other out, the former earthworm married twice with itself, fathered two new generations of earthworms, experienced dual paternity and dual maternity. The life of these half-worms became terribly complicated and I could no longer really follow the situation that had arisen but I later often dreamed of living a quadruple life of two females and two males with numerus descendants.

My oligochaetic friends might have an unusual sex life but the underground world is in fact the domain of fungi and springtails. The tiny collembola with their thick heads constantly seek out the scented white threads that spread like capillaries through every inch of soil. Everywhere around me is teeming with them, there are thousands. Tiny, purple, soft as velvet. In their wake the gentle scent of fresh earth. It is thanks to them that the enchanting odour of geosmin spreads discreetly through this dark underworld. They are the ones who create the scent of spring when the snow vanishes and the damp earth appears.

On my way I did not only meet springtails. Whenever I ate my way to the soft humus close to the surface, tiny moss piglets and unusual diplurans came crawling my way. The most entertaining animals in this light ground, however, were the family clans of centipedes. Diplopoda, symphylans and pauropods, each one advocating their own concept of movement even though they all rely on dozens and dozens of pairs of legs. These arthropods are really quite crazy. Why would it matter how many pairs of legs someone has and how large their feet are?

I had kept the eye that was facing the sky closed all the time, listening to and smelling only the life beneath the surface. So one night I also opened the other eye and listened to the other side. In the sky the night could be darker than the night below ground. When the night is dense enough, silence also stills, is less audible, every call without an echo. But normally the darkness had a greenish hue and the silence echoed in the chirping of crickets and waves of croaking from frogs. The roots were damp in the night and cooled my body pleasantly. The only problem was that unpleasant visitors also found shelter in them. Hedgehogs stalked mice and voles which crept out of their burrows into the coolness of night, looking for seeds. My God, how these animals stank! And as if that was not enough, in between their spines they were full of fat ticks, sucking on their blood. They kept sniffing and pushing their snouts under the roots until they dragged out into the open a blind baby mouse. When they had finished with this, they grabbed a maybeetle grub that happened in its ignorance to craw too close to the surface. In the next jaunt it was the turn of an earthworm that resisted desperately, causing it to lose its abdomen, part of its liver and stomach. With its other end, saving its head, it managed to escape down a burrow, outside the reach of the hedgehog’s claws. The gorging wasn’t over until morning when the hedgehogs and shrews withdrew to their stuffy dens.

With the eye turned towards the sky, I preferred to watch the plundering owls. They too had a scent but they did not touch me. As soon as they seized their prey, they disappeared somewhere into the forest. At night there was no blood, bodies were devoured instantly.

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It began to rain. The rain fell slowly and persistently. Dampness returned to the cracked earth, bringing with it sweet relief to my desiccated body. But also swelling and growing were the white strands of fungi. Their mycelia intertwined as they spread unstoppably, their strings sticking to my body, and before I was able to do anything, the part of me buried in the soil was entirely covered in a soft fungal mesh. The mere thought that this underground mould would drain the life out of me and convert me into decomposing blackness terrified me. The prospect of such a horrible, inescapable fate brought me waves of acute nausea. It was probably just caused by the intoxicating smell for the severe sickness soon began to give way to a sensation of comfort that slowly prevailed.

 The snow-white outfit had clearly not found me by chance. No, the almost forced benetting of my underground body was intended as the start of some kind of celebration. This was foretold by a multitude of welcoming greetings. These came in regular pulses along the white filaments from the direction of the forest and initially rendered me weak. I could never have imagined that my stay on the banks of the frog pond meant this much to the other trees. The tangle of fungi from my body grew into a web through which I became acquainted with an almost five-hundred-year old oak tree, a wonderful blue-grey beech, a silver birch, a spindle tree and a bunch of young hornbeam shoots. Trees old and young were greeting me and hailing my role on the banks of the frog pond. Belonging to the community of trees and their warm welcome touched me deeply. Only now do I realise how superficially I used to consider the forest, without ever even trying to understand it.

 After a night of incredible dreams the morning found me covered in dew. It was time I returned to my daily routine.

 I stand hunched over the pond that is vanishing in the summer heat. I will continue to stand here for decades to come, watchfully observing the murky water. I will wait for the first late-autumn winds to blow bare the leaves from my yellow withies. During the dormant period of icy stillness, I will think about the events of the past year. Until the end of winter I will stand in the thawing yellowed snow, donned in a judicial robe of damp, dark, almost black bark. Despite my stooping posture and bristly crown, nobody will be so disrespectful as to disturb my peace before spring.

 But now it is still the height of summer drought. The pond before me will dry up in a few days’ time. Frogs and newts are jostling and crawling over each other in the shallow water that no longer offers any real shelter, either from the rays of the sun or from predators. The water beetles have already flown away, perhaps even this night the amphibians will also set off for the nearby fishpond.