

Julya Rabinowich

Lady Eartheater

Translated by Katy Derbyshire

It's hot in Leo's flat, not summery hot but desert hot. Leo and I swelter like Bedouins wrapped in linen sheets in the stagnant, plastering heat. The water in Leo's glass is as warm as the moisture on our faces. The linen sheet casts folds around my torso and my thighs, running in hills towards the end of the bed. In the semi-darkness of the early morning they look like a desert landscape, a white dune, and another, lots of them, in irregular rows.

The moon sinks behind the earth's arches, the sky barely differentiated from the horizon, a slightly lighter blue with the promise of even more scorching heat. Somewhere an animal howls, drawn out and hoarse.

I often heard that howling in Greece, where whole packs of dogs gone wild lived on the beaches where I slept, hungry and out of place like me and just as sly. Cast out and afraid, they soon merged into a single huge entity of many mouths, of many eyes and ears and scraping paws, individual bodies large, small, suckling and murderous. Sometimes they hunted down other animals, and I heard stories about how they'd attacked people.

Back then I often slept on the beach and I wasn't scared of them; I felt I was more a part of their pack than many of the dogs. Once a couple of them came to my sleeping place like scouts, cautious, with watchful eyes and pricked-up ears, not in hostility. They appeared soundlessly upon a hill, dark shapes against dark night sky, white dots shining intensely where they were not. Stars.

On Greek beaches the sand starts burning under your soles in the morning, so intensely heated by midday that I feared for my plastic sandals, feared I'd have to peel them from my feet like a reeking, brightly coloured second skin. I want to peel Leo's steaming skin off me before he plasters me, blocks my pores, before my stench gets as odious as his, ever-present, in his sweat, in his breath, in his touch, with which he wants to overrun me, grow onto me, grow healthy through me in my place. I shift away from him in the tropical heat and he rolls after me with a

whisper, giving off sounds reminiscent of an animal, of a baby. Leo casts out a slack hand like a tentacle that I can only just evade, falling into the linen-sheeted vacuum between us and destroying the white desert landscape, from beneath which I extract myself smoothly, angling my legs slowly and placing my feet carefully on the green linoleum, ten red spots on streaky green in the light of the round Leo lamp.

I creep into the bathroom and push aside my face on the mirrored door; I don't want to see myself now, I don't want to see either Leo or myself. I splash cold water over the back of my neck, fetching a painkiller out of the makeup bag that has taken the place of Leo's aftershave; he doesn't use them any more. Close the cabinet door. Dunk my whole head in the basin and turn on the tap. My hair starts to curl up in the damp, my face appearing furtively in the semi-darkness like the gorgon in Perseus' shield. I take a practiced duck down away from my eyes, and I'm in safety.

On the balcony looking out onto the backyard, it's hot and quiet, the birds just beginning to stir. Leo's ashtray on the edge of the railing, full of ash. I pick it up and empty it down into the yard, a slight wind coming up and blowing the ash sideways to the neighbour's balcony. I look up; it's hazy, no stars to be seen, no sand beneath me, no dogs. I stand in the quiet and wait and realize that I'm listening out for Leo's breathing, and when I can't hear anything an indescribable disquiet takes hold of me, and I deliberately throw the ashtray on the ground so that it smashes and makes a noise and I still can't hear anything and I wait a while and creep back into the fug and lay my ear on his wet chest and feel it in motion and relax.

My back's lying on the earth's damp grassy back, both coated in a thin sheen of wetness. It's muggy. We're sweating too, our moisture touching and blending us together, the earth and me. Back to back like two duellers. On her back tree trunks raised in mistrust like bristles, on mine only the pale hairs, for I'm cold despite the air's lukewarm tea temperature. We have ten paces before we turn to each other, before the first bullet flies. I'll cheat. I'll cheat like I always do, I've never managed to do without a lie, a deception, I'm too weak to play with my cards on the table, I'm too strong to go under, not yet. The house is still waiting. The sister. The mother. My son. I press my shoulder blades more firmly into my opponent, I feel them forming hollows in her surface, detect tiny clumps of her body on the back of my neck, detached from her endlessly

heavy whole, so much heavier than I am, so much larger, disinterested and merciless and yet still home. I close my eyes.

Hold me tight. Take me back. But take me back immaculate, take me whole, hide me with you, wipe me out, change me until I become something else, perhaps a cow or a plant.

My fingers seek a path through the grass, impatiently I bore them into the ground next to me, tugging out blades of grass with no compassion, the nail on my ring finger breaks off, the pain brief but effective, I raise the hand to my mouth. Tiny crumbs of black earth remain behind on my lips.

I open my eyes. Black bread of the homeland, I think. My mother's rye bread occurs to me, baked herself on a Sunday, wrapped in an embroidered cloth, heavy fabric with red embroidery, everything about her is heavy, red, black, familiar, the steaming bread on the rough wooden table in the kitchen, the steaming stone threshold, the steaming hands above the snowdrifts, the half-hooded, dark eyes, as dark as her black bread that she holds lovingly clutched to her flat chest, every loaf of bread perfectly round, the belly of a fertile woman whose fruit is not just edible but good, not contorted and spoilt like my life, like my son who she's looking after for instead of me, because someone has to earn a living and because I can hardly bear either of them. Her long, straight hair twisted into a strict knot, her skin shimmering through at her temples for a while now, red earrings in her equally transparent small earlobes.

I feel hungry, suddenly and overwhelmingly hungry; the hunger tears me off the earth, out of the grass, onto my feet, I'm sick with hunger, above me the sun, the grass revolving, a kaleidoscope in green and yellow, at the edge of the grass the dark line of the horse chestnuts turning along briskly.

'Do you want coffee, Leo?' I warble from the kitchen, as my fingers comb the drawer in front of me, my hands trembling, and I have to concentrate firmly to stop my movements becoming too erratic, or he'll hear me.

'Where are you?!' shouts Leo somewhere in the flat, in the semi-darkness, invisible. His voice is blurred; I can't locate it.

'Just a second,' I call out. All that's in the drawer is countless boxes of his medication, wrongly folded information leaflets bulging out of them, empty capsule packs, brightly packaged

condoms, a pack of cigarettes.

I close the drawer carefully and make for his raincoat, hanging over a chair next to the kitchen table. Neatly placed over the back, not tossed aside like my jacket, black folds of soft, light fabric beneath which a brown shoe protrudes, the spike heel worn down. I ought to go to the cobbler's. I ought to go to the doctor's. For days I've been tortured by burning pains in my abdomen, which I try to drive back inside me with soft pressure from my hands, back inside me and then right away.

'Be there in a second,' I lie. My manicured hand vanishes into his large coat pockets. I slip into his secret that I absolutely have to reveal, and root around inside him, like he'd root around inside me if he still could. I feel a lighter, a tissue, small change. The other pocket is empty. I take a gulp of cold coffee from a bowl still standing on the kitchen worktop, a last remainder of a dark puddle, deposited on the base. If I'm lucky he'll be asleep by now. The bedsprings squeak as he tosses from one side to the other. If he's hidden his keys in his trouser pocket I'll have to wait until night falls, wait for the jerk with which he opens the top button, for the rustle of the denim along his thickset calves, for his sweaty warmth on my belly, on my back, for the whistling sound that escapes his throat once he's finally fallen asleep. I pat down the jackets, the old uniform, I look under the piles of old, damp newspapers covering the floor. In the corner is an abandoned litter tray, the cat long gone. He had it taken to his parents, even though it helped him relax on sleepless nights. I'm a cheaper pet that looks after itself. It's an undefined feeling that makes me stand tense and pointlessly in the hall in semi-darkness, almost like my mother stood in ours when I went away once again, her gaze fixed, not looking for a partner and not needing one, and so I can't help thinking of my mother and then inevitably of my son.

Is he kneeling by my mother's bed, sweating as badly as I am, his hoarse voice begging to be let in, then demanding? In the dark, everything the pictures in his head try to persuade him of could be true. Does she wake up from her always light sleep, in the hope that the breath on her cheek could be her husband's, at long last, and how long will it take until the disappointment wakes her up fully and the dreams finally leave her over to the real darkness in her bed, containing only my son and her, no one else. They look at each other, they'll be looking at each other unwaveringly, I watch them looking at each other unwaveringly, in the darkness, still a long time to go until dawn, with livid fear, with the certainty of getting something that's wrong, something

disappointing, something they weren't looking for, but without which they can't go on, he caught up in his longing, she in her hoping, united by the ties I force upon them with my repeated absences. Outside, a dog barks, probably the neighbour's, woken by my son's bedroom door banging, the clumsy footsteps in the hall because he can't find the light switch and can't get his bearings in his upset confusion, and walks into our old peasant cupboards. I see myself standing next to him, there in the dingy hall among the painted peasant furniture, the rough carpet runner with red cockerels woven into it under the bare soles of my feet, laying my tired head on his shoulder. He smells more familiar than anything else in the world, I can still smell the possetted breast milk in the corners of his mouth, I lay my head on his shoulder with all its weight and say, 'When are you going to die at last?'

Leo's flat has two large windows, looking out on the wall of the house on the other side of the narrow road. Trams stop directly in front of the entrance, their shrill brakes tearing Leo out of his sleep every night, the sleep he seeks and seeks and so rarely finds when he needs it. In the morning he's fuggy with the sleep that holds him all the more firmly in its grip, taunting him, seeing as he's spent half the night chasing after it and yet still remained just a collector, a minute-chaser, hour-counter, nit-picker, hair-splitter.

'My sleep,' he says, as if he'd inherited it, purchased it, leased it with a contract, and as if he were now being cheated out of it, over and over every day, which appals him increasingly, just like anyone else who is robbed of his goods and chattels through devious knavery. He's practicing already for his great sleep, which is presumably immanent, and like anyone devoted to his hobby, he does not wish to be disturbed. For hours he lies on his back, his hands laid by turns devoutly and majestically above the protruding high hill of his belly on his chest, upon which grey-blond hairs coil up like tiny, moist snakes.

At times he stares at the ceiling for hours. I've removed the cobwebs in the corners so that not everything he sees reminds him of decay. What remains is the sun-bleached contours of the chandelier that he ex-wife took with her. He looks at the worn cable winding along the false stucco ulcer on the ceiling, the empty white ring of the fixture, the tiny scraps coming loose from the woven cable. He switches on the lamp I put on his bedside table. Then he fixes his gaze on his swollen feet, peeking out from under the cover. Broad, grooved toenails. Leo spends a great deal of time lying down. His life takes place in the brief phases of my attention and the extended

islands of time between them. His parents often call and he puts the phone down or doesn't even pick up in the first place. They want to come and pick him up, they want to take him to hospital, rescue his savings books, they want to catch me in the act, catch me sucking the last remains out of their son, but I'm careful like every vampire and Leo is aggressive towards them and they often find themselves outside locked doors and ringing long and hopelessly and in vain.

The windows in Leo's flat look out on a road, dark and narrow, protected by the pale cobwebs of the net curtains. I value the peace that the Austrians grant me from their concerns, preferring to watch the red poinsettia in the white pot with the gilt edge than to have to watch their spite, the malice they do to themselves and others every day. So I get all the more angry at aggressive displays of allegedly intimate acts, such as Leo's neighbours like to perform in the flat diagonally opposite. This exhibitionism is a cheap trick, because it happens for no good reason. It is so objectionable that the bile rises in my throat and burns it yellow as a Satan's mushroom. I can spot their window from a distance, the green swathes of fabric pulled aside, their naked bodies in motion. I know they're just waiting to humiliate Leo with their provocative functionality, and I know I could eliminate them right away, slay them like a beast, throw rotten eggs, followed up by Leo's used toilet brush like a mace. I could look the other way. Looking the other way is mother's speciality, not mine. The copulating couple grin. I presume they think I'm an uptight housewife, slightly past my prime, with a mortgage and a beautician around the corner who waxes off my moustache. Framed by Leo's window, by Leo's life, I turn harmless, tame, bourgeois. My brief pause for breath, a temporary resting place, very different to the other rest stops along my way, scattered on motorways and suburbs of industrial towns. When I leave the house in the evening to earn the money three people are waiting for, I never put myself on display for no good reason.

And so I ask in a saintly voice, 'Leo, would you like to play darts with me?'

Leo pushes himself up from his many pillows on his elbows, his tray with the empty crockery sliding downwards. All he catches is his cup; the bowl from which he has just been slurping borsht clatters to the floor and leftover beetroot falls out, accurate deep-red cubes. They fall like small dice onto a huge wooden board game, and I'm in the mood to play now, even more than before.

‘Here?’ Leo looks at me, uncomprehending. ‘I haven’t played for two years,’ he says. ‘How do you know I used to play? I’ve never told you about it.’

I curse my anger that lets me get carried away. Of course he’s never told me about it, just as he never mentions anything to do with his ex-wife. That chapter of his life isn’t quite finished off and locked away, but the door’s tightly shut on it. Just as tightly as the drawer in his dresser, which I’ve long since discovered on my tours of the flat, tidied away like the key he keeps hidden in his former desk, now mutated into a mere storage space. Every now and then he tells me he’ll get down to it today, tidy up his desk so he can finally continue his professional correspondence, return to his office, to his company car. Back to his world, far away from mine.

He hasn’t introduced me to a single acquaintance. I heard him telling his upstairs neighbours I was a cheap cleaning lady, and I know he assumed I wouldn’t understand him because he was speaking in a low voice and a strong dialect.

But I have very keen ears. I try to understand all his contacts to the outside world, to catalogue them and assess them. All the help he could get from outside makes me less necessary and puts me at greater risk. I catch myself getting jealous of these escape attempts, which are absolutely harmless. His neighbours know what’s up, they complained to the letting agent before I arrived about the smells coming out of his flat, but didn’t help him in any way or even inform him of their complaint at least.

I tell myself that over and over, and still a slight unease overcomes me at times, driving me through Leo’s flat, making me go through his phone calls, his post. Sometimes Get Well Soon cards come, many to begin with, later becoming sparser, and I open them, read them and dispose of them. Some I stick back down again and hand them over, if I feel like it. He’s surprised his wife hasn’t been in touch for so long; he can’t believe his colleagues have forgotten him. I answer the same way as I always do in such situations, patient and motherly, softer than my mother would ever have been, who cooled my forehead with far rougher movements than she used to wash our threshold, and the rough cooling of the forehead was an act of tenderness in comparison to her beatings, which came at you from an ambush, unexpected and all the more demeaning. I instantly feel the motions of her hands on my body, swaying like a conductor’s baton, precisely placed blows, and now we’re playing her music, one round and then the next, and at some point this game starts to be fun, and I do things that I know will invoke a beating,

because I want to prove to her that I don't care and that I've won.

The children's hands and mine too are warm, smooth, together; I'm released from the cleanliness of my parents' house, united with all the goatherds and goose-girls of the village. We scream, we laugh, we push each other over and roll in the dirt, coat each other in sand, warm water splashes out from under our fingertips and sprinkles freckles on all our faces without exception, and at last we're a summery, uncaring, noisy creature, ten times as tall as the grownups and twenty times louder. I pinch my eyes shut and the skin of the girl next door, who I know only from a distance because I'm not allowed out of our house, brushes against mine and is velvet.

The blow hits me all the more unexpectedly, deliberate and hard on the back of my head. My lower jaw hits the upper jaw at full force, my teeth clashing. The voices blur temporarily into white noise, curdling into a salty taste in my mouth. Minutes later, I'm sitting at our kitchen table while she cleans me silently with water that's too hot and movements that are too fast, and I spit soapy remains into a bloodied tissue. I don't cry. I gather up the disgusting tasting liquid in my mouth, swish it once from left to right and back again and let it drip onto the rosy paper, while the towel made of roughly woven fabric leaves stretches of flame on my chest, which light up between my mother's movements as if she were painting me. As red as an icon.

'Play with me, Leo,' I ask him again. I've found the board but not a single dart, neither in the locked drawer nor in the others, and I don't want to spend any money on things that won't get me anything other than a single pleasure.

Leo gives an uncertain smile. He knows me as a rager and a carer, but not as a player of games.

'I don't know,' he mumbles and throws off the cover.

A gust of warmth comes out from under the cover. I find the smell familiar by now; it doesn't bother me. I catch myself feeling that the smell helps me sink into sleep after all on long, restless nights, falling heavy as a stone through Leo's arm laid around me, through the bolster and the mattress with the rubber sheet, all the way through the concrete and iron skeleton of the house and the asphalted road into a deep, soft earthy realm, catching me at last.

'Tell me where the darts are,' I encourage him, gently stroking his skin.

Leo puts his arm around my shoulders and hangs his entire Leo weight from my backbone. I pull

him further up until he's half-hanging out of bed like an intestine out of a gaping wound.

'I can't get out,' he gasps. He sounds as if he's close to tears but keeping them in with all his might. I'm merciless – I keep pulling at him.

'Come on, Leo. Yes, you can.'

I refuse to believe that he'll be lying in this bed with me until the end of time, I don't want to be trapped with him under his familiarly stinking cover, with no prospect of ever leaving this room again.

With some effort, I tip him back onto the bolsters and go and look.

'In the study, in the little chest. In the pencil case,' Leo calls out directions.

I can't open the chest until I've shoved aside entire piles of newspapers and work papers, fanned out in front of me like Nastja's tarot cards. I pick one out at random. It says: 'Dear Mr Brandstegl, we have now found someone to take your place...'

The name is illegible; Leo has put a coffee cup down on the letter, many times over, on purpose. I turn the sheet of paper so that the signature is at the top, Leo's name at the bottom, hanging upside down. Leo is the hanged man, the letter is a card, and everything's different.

'Have you got it?' Leo yells at the top of his lungs from his sick bay, but I don't answer. I drop the Leo tarot card on the pile of the rest of his story, reach into the chest and find the pencil case. The side you open up when you undo the zip is decorated with a skateboard. I take out the dart, hurrying now – all this performance has cost me so much time. I throw the pencil case on the floor and slam the door behind me and run into the hall.

'Have you got it?' Leo repeats as I walk past his door, along the corridor to the open window, opposite which the young girl is squatting semi-naked and lounging in the sun, and as her eyes drift lazily in my direction I aim and throw and miss that insolent green eye by an inch. She squeals and grabs at her shoulder, from which Leo's chewed plastic grip is protruding, the rusty dart in her skin, already wet with a tiny drop of crimson, and I seize the moment and duck down beneath the window and creep soundlessly back into the hall.