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Junil
in barbarian lands

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In the light, *we* read the inventions of others;
in the *darkness we invent* our own stories.
Alberto Manguel, *The Library at Night*

What say ye, men,
will ye splice hands on it, now?
Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*

PART ONE

The Province of the Pond

ONE

Rage is dead

There was once a man who despised his daughter. This evident and constant contempt was the indirect cause of the man's death and thus explains why he only briefly appears in this novel. Soon, not long after appearing out of nowhere on the blank page, he'll go back to nowhere, forever. And if he remains alive and implacable in his daughter's mind, he will only be so in allusive, perhaps non-essential appearances throughout this story, like early morning air that tries to become a breeze but abruptly gives up. Fading away will be his punishment.

This contempt will also be the reason for his daughter's actions, the sting that will keep jabbing until the scourge that has dogged her for so many years comes to nothing. This daughter, once she has decided to fight her father's contempt, will invest a considerable part of her energies into never accepting this feeling as her own. So, since she is the main character of the adventures described here, contempt will make way for other feelings, sensations, and principles. The father is dead, and rage is dead. Perhaps other kinds of rage will replace this one.

This said, it should be pointed out that this first chapter, which might look like a sort of prologue, preface, or introductory caveat, is an integral part of the story, or novel, or whatever you want to call these pages. The story has opened with the first sentence, when the barely sketched father and daughter have started to exist, to breathe, to move in the mind of the writer and also, perhaps, in the minds of those who, so far, think it's worth continuing to read. The daughter—whose name is Junil—and the father—left nameless—are now trying to be the flesh and blood of a story that has prevailed since the very first word. And that, right now, will continue.

TWO

Eight-year-old daughters

First, the fire. Lighting the fire with the wood heaped by the hearth. It's not a very warm fire, but enough to boil water for the morning herbs and cook a scrap or larger piece of lamb, chicken, dog, or fish. Junil knows that the important thing is that, on waking, her father can smell the herbs and catch a whiff of the bit of animal, and that after going out to piss he can rub his hands by the fire, thinking that it has been lit early enough for him to notice its warmth flittering over almost all of his body when he sits down.

And, once the fire is burning, she waits for her father's pronouncement. She doesn't stand motionless by the fire but tries to appear busy so that, this way, her father won't notice her fear. Of course, he does notice. So, when he doesn't like the fire, he scolds her, squeezes her arm until it bruises, more or less lazily slaps her cheek, pulls her hair, or gobbles down half of her piece of meat and, if he's in a good mood, tells her to put more wood on the fire, reminding her that, without him, she'd be a beggar, a whore, a guttersnipe with one foot in the grave. He curses, spits on the floor, scratches his crotch, and ends up staring into the fire, looking for some reason to start a new day.

Junil obeys, stays silent, and tries to anticipate her father's wishes. His first wish of the day, the fire, is the most predictable of all. It's strange, she sometimes thinks, that the morning's peace depends on the flames, when it was precisely flames that led them to live in this lair of rancour, in this never totally extinguished wrath of the father, and in the unrelenting fear of the daughter.

One night of fire, both of them died in the previous time and were born the way they are now.

What happened was this.

There were five of them and they lived near the border, in a town of renowned markets that were able to keep the peace between the empire in the north and the barbarians in the south. It was a small town that might have been almost prosperous if there hadn't been, either side of the line, gangs of bandits who lived at the expense of the townspeople and travellers. The few troops sent by the empire chased them without courage or ambition, doing little to prevent them from coming down from the mountains on nights when the moon had waned, running along the tracks, killing everything they came across, bursting into any village to destroy it in a couple of hours. News of the attack, muted and distorted, reached the capital of the province days later and only occasionally did some official get the idea of organising a raid against the robbers, an idea that all too often ended up being watered down in the difficulties of convincing the governor or his henchmen. On the northern side of the border, the barbarian side, political power was a hazy concept and it was only thought necessary to pursue a group of bandits if they got in the way of the warriors serving the local chieftain.

To sum up, the borders seemed to be stable enough. Having to worry about watching them was a bore. And the robbers, once they'd understood that there'd be no brutal retaliation if they

didn't go too far, learned how to keep their heads down long enough to be regarded as an acceptable nuisance.

The villages, then, had to organise their own defence and, like all the men, Junil's father sometimes patrolled the mountains, searching in the snow and near waterholes for traces of any hostile presence. He was a public scribe and believed that the only literate person in the village should be exempted from the border watch, but he knew he couldn't protest or make demands. The village was too small for a scribe and his family to live well. The vegetable plot and two milking cows provided more food than the business of writing letters and contracts. This obligatory dependence on vegetables and animals meant that Junil's father tended to feign humility.

Thus it was that, at the beginning of a spring still laced through with ice, Junil was thrown into the first disaster of her life. Her father was out patrolling and the daughter asleep at home. Neither father nor daughter ever knew why or how the fire had, all of a sudden, destroyed everything.

Junil was eight when this first disaster happened. It was night and she was asleep, like her mother, her two younger brothers, and the family's only slave. So, if she had to explain once again what happened that night, after having tried to explain it so many times, she'd only be able to talk about the smoke, the glow that ripped through the dark, her mother's cries, which woke her with a start. She'd say, if she had to remember it, I got up and immediately started coughing… I couldn't see because my eyes were stinging… Mother was screaming and she pulled me to her and opened the windows… She threw me out… I hurt my elbow… and she said stay there, you'll help the others to get out… she disappeared and that was the last time I saw her alive… I never again saw my brothers alive either… I don't know what happened.

The flames burned down nine houses and killed six free people, three slaves, five cows, sixteen pigs, and a lot of chickens and rabbits. The fire burned till mid-morning, and no one could work out where it had started. When Junil's father came home, he only had a daughter.

He didn't despise her immediately, though he soon realised that he'd been truly ill-starred in this calamity of losing almost everything. If he was going to lose almost everything, he would have preferred to have been left with a wife instead of an eight-year-old daughter, or with either of his two sons instead of an eight-year-old daughter, and maybe even the slave or the two milking cows instead of an eight-year-old daughter. Eight-year-old daughters are a nuisance for a man who now has nothing.

In the next few days, lodged with the other survivors in some of the more hospitable houses, he pondered the possibility of abandoning Junil. Going it alone had many advantages. Being encumbered with an eight-year-old daughter had countless disadvantages. But he knew that, if he abandoned her, he'd have to go far away to escape the disapproval that would spread through the southern borderlands. Although, by law, he could get rid of any member of his family, a deeper, unspoken law prevailed, the law of murmurs and sidelong glances, and he knew this was pitiless. If he remained in the lands of the empire, he'd come across people who'd tell his new neighbours what he'd done. He didn't want to risk going north to the barbarians. He had to choose between a long journey, alone, to a place where no one had heard about the scribe's dead family, and inventing a new life bedogged by his daughter. Thus, his contempt was born.

THREE

You can take it easy

Junil has grown and, by growing, has become the most important being in her father's life, as a servant daughter doing everything he doesn't want to do himself.

Now they're living five days by cart from their village, five days to the south, in Nyala, capital of the province of the pond, where those who've got time to count say more than eight thousand people, including slaves, are living. And Junil's father is determined to get rich.

They arrived one spring evening when winter was trying to reappear. For part of their journey they'd huddled in ox carts, but they'd walked most of the way. The ice that bloomed again, the falling snow, which those in the know said would be the last until autumn, had made the whole trip an unrelenting torment. Junil believed it was her father's fault because he hadn't sacrificed any animal to the gods. She would done it gladly, but the cold was so unyielding that it revealed no animal she might capture. She only had the lice on her head but she knew that sacrificing a creature that was smaller than the nail on her little finger was sacrilege. Her mother, who often had to hide from her father in

order to worship the gods, had tried to make Junil both pious and discreet. Hence, on the way to Nyala, when she went to defecate, she drew in the snow the animals she thought she could procure as soon as spring asserted itself: a mouse, a lizard, a beetle, a baby sparrow. She promised the gods that she'd soon offer up this blood and asked them to be patient and to help her, though she didn't know whether the gods listened to promises or if they had a list of devout sacrifice debtors.

When they arrived in the town, they made do for several weeks in a pigsty with no pigs, behind the home of an old client of Junil's father. This man had agreed to put them up after a neighbourhood seer had read in the entrails of a disembowelled cat that any good deeds he might do before spring would be returned to him nine times over. He thought that an unused pigsty for a ruined scribe and his daughter would be a worthwhile investment and, to wring out even more blessings, he fed them twice a day. When Junil's father bowed before him in gratitude, the man replied that it was his duty to help newcomers to his town, all the while mentally multiplying by nine each meal he provided, each kind word he uttered, and each smile he bestowed on them.

During those weeks, Junil's father left the pigsty every morning to look for work, which was one of the most difficult things to achieve in a town that was teeming with slaves. The people who were too poor to own a slave couldn't pay anyone to work for them, while those who weren't so poor bought slaves as soon as they could, so they didn't need to hire anyone. There were no boxes to unload, courtyards to sweep, or latrines to clean, no way for a newcomer to earn a few bronze coins. Without the two meals they were given every day, Junil and her father would soon have died.

Her father often wondered about the possibility of selling her to some slave merchant but knew he'd live to regret it. If they

could survive two or three years more, he'd be able to get Junil working as a prostitute, so it was worth waiting. He didn't think she was very pretty but hoped that, with her menses, she'd be nicer looking, and then he began to daydream. A pimp's life was a good life. He just needed to be patient for two or three years, and not so long if she was precocious. With the first earnings he'd buy an alluring prepubescent youth and then an almost nubile girl, after which he'd keep expanding the business. Every day he checked Junil's figure, looking for budding breasts, but since she remained so small, such a scrap of a thing, his contempt was rekindled. In order to assuage it, he needed to go out and get drunk and fornicate, but he couldn't afford even the most bitter wine or the oldest whore.

Until he got himself a job.

And since he's now getting up every morning to go to work, he demands a nicely burning fire. If it isn't warm enough, he still pinches Junil, slaps her face, or pulls her hair when he walks behind her but now with less zeal. Since he's been working, he pretends he's unaware of her presence except to give orders or tell her off because he says she's so slow anyone would think she was a cripple. He says this often, ever since he discovered that this barb hurts her even more than his usual insults.

"You're so slow anyone would think you're a cripple."

They're still living in the pigsty but now he's paying rent because spring has come and the pigsty owner no longer has reason to be generous. He's only waiting for the good deeds he did in the name of the gods to be returned ninefold. The rent isn't too high and it comes with two mattresses, two malodorous woollen blankets, a set of plates and cups, some flint for lighting their fire, an iron-ringed wooden bucket to fetch water from the well, and another, of rough wood, for defecating.

In these early days of improvement in their lives, Junil's tasks have hardly changed at all, although her father comes back every evening with a handful of small coins. Once the morning fire is lit and the first meal prepared, she has to wander about and pick up what she can, whether found or stolen. She usually goes to the pond, on the western side of the town, which isn't so densely populated and where it's easier to run and breathe among the muddy patches of the year's last snowfall. And she keeps a lookout, digs around, and tries to avoid the other kids who are also keeping a lookout, digging around, and throwing rocks at her if they can.

Then, one day, her father orders her to stop foraging for trifles, without explaining why he's forbidding it. Junil is too young to understand that her father's plans for prosperity include pretending to be less poor, less cunning, and less unscrupulous than he really is.

Junil is now spending part of the day at the threshold of the pigsty from which she can only see the courtyard of the main house and a snippet of sky to which she often raises her eyes. If only, she thinks, the sky could suck her up and become her home, she'd be its most faithful servant. She'd ride on a cloud, and however puny it was she'd be content. She'd piss to make the rain denser and would comb the wind with her open hand. Her fantasies never vary but they seem to grow and flourish a little every day, so that her domains above the clouds become stronger from so much thinking about them. And if ever she disobeys, goes out, and wanders around, she does so trying not to look for anything that, not long ago, she might have scavenged. She ventures near the pond, watches the gulls flying, and the fishing boats breaking up what remains of the ice, and then she goes back. She lies to her father if ever he asks what she did when she was out. Lying to him is nice, she thinks.

Spring has come and gone, summer set in, reigned and, just when it made way for autumn, the first squall of icy air blew in from the north. Many swallows, forgotten by the gods who used to warn them, died with frozen wings as they flew southwards. Winter burst in and mounted autumn. It was like a rape of seasons.

Junil's father, however, didn't seem bothered, and has even been smiling more than ever before since the first snowfall. Soon, he announces to Junil that he's got an important job and that they'll be going to live in the owner's house that evening. You can take it easy. After tomorrow you won't have to light the fire.

FOUR

But Junil can't read

Junil's father is working in one of Nyala's two bookshops.

The bookseller's house, workshop, and shop are part of a block of buildings in the centre of town, which is so overcrowded that not even the most important temples have an esplanade that might give them a certain majesty. Until now, Junil and her father have been confined to the squalid suburbs, the paths leading to the pond, and the smell of frying fish floating along their entire length. Now, they're surrounded by tall, not always straight brick houses, separated by alleys that are so narrow and winding that they only insinuate the possibility of moving through them. The smell of cooking fish is replaced by an enormous variety of odours, agreeable and foetid, which are invigorated or annulled when they mix.

Junil, who is walking as fast as she can to keep up with her father, is trembling with excitement. As they advance, they're leaving behind, together with the pigsty, the baker's oven watched over by an earless slave, the potter who tells the children stories about gladiators, the narrow shoemakers' square,

the holy wasteland where any father can abandon an unwanted baby, the screeching seer who spits and wriggles her red-dyed shoulders to attract customers, the old slaughterhouse that has been converted into a temple for the gods coming from the east, and a whole lot of noisy, anonymous neighbours.

But when they reach the bookshop, Junil only wants to shrink. Everything seems too big for her, and she can't believe she's going to live inside. The house, narrow and not very high, owes its air of respectability to the drawings and words, only slightly faded, covering the façade. They're all in broad letters, amidst blue and orange flowers, and singing or soaring birds.

JAVÓS DELENÓS
I WRITE VERSES FOR SPECIAL OCCASIONS
I MAKE BOOKS
I SELL BOOKS
NO ONE WHO HAS ENTERED HERE HAS EVER REGRETTED IT

By the front door, some twenty sheets of shiny or faded papyrus have been stuck to thin wooden planks, so that passers-by can read, free of charge, extracts from the works being sold.

But Junil can't read. Her father doesn't want to waste time teaching such a dumb daughter about anything. In her hometown, Junil had stood for many a long time behind her father as he worked on a document, observing what his hand was doing, trying to understand how these almost imperceptible movements could produce such subtly different lines and how, from these differences, words, sentences, and solemn obligations were born.

So, this is where you're working now, Junil thinks, but prefers not to say anything.

They go inside and immediately take in the smells.

Father and daughter know the smell of papyrus and the smell of ink but there are new aromas floating around in here, bookshop smells. Junil's father isn't yet accustomed to so many different smells but makes no effort to understand them, or love them, or make them his own. However, Junil wants to be left alone for a while so she can work out where they come from, map them, order them by preference. She knows she shouldn't hurry, that she can take her time about it, but mutters under her breath when her father tugs at her sleeve to make her follow him. Come on, dammit, Master Javós is waiting for us.

Master Javós is bald, bearded, with a mouth prone to laughter. Like all the booksellers in the north of the empire, he's wearing a dark blue tunic and his hands are ink stained, like the hands of anyone who makes ink. He comes from a small island where it never snows but when he tells people about this, they shrug or laugh. That's impossible.

"Oh, come in, come in. Welcome!" He then smiles at Junil and points at her. "I know who you are, my girl. We've found a very comfortable palliasse for you, as you'll soon see. I hope you like the house and the job... If you want, you can go upstairs while I speak with your father."

He calls in the direction of the stairs. "Marmú, come down. Right now!"

Marmú takes his time coming down. Like all the Nyala slaves, he wears a leather collar, but his is little more than a fine strip, signalling that he has earned his master's trust and can hope to be freed before he dies. He's old, and he should be freed soon, or should realise that his master, like so many masters, has only let him glimpse his emancipation as a way of securing his fidelity. Besides his age, he's slow, not because his legs are

shaky but because slowness draws attention to his rank. This is a privilege he has earned over the years and through efficiency. There is nothing slower than a mountain, and few things more respected, Marmú will tell Junil one day.

If the house is narrow and not very high, it is very deep. A dark passageway leads inside and, following Marmú, Junil has the impression that she's never understood so well what a rabbit must feel like when exploring a burrow it doesn't know. On either side of the passageway, a whole series of curtains of yellowish cloth screen the entrances of tiny rooms.

"It used to be a whorehouse. That's why there are so many rooms, but don't worry about that … You'd know what a whorehouse is, wouldn't you?"

Junil nods but remains silent. Sometimes she's guessed that a whorehouse might be the future her father has planned for her, although this suspicion hasn't made her feel any particular emotion. Adults copulate, she knows that much, as she's heard them talking about it, and sometimes she's seen them doing it, but is unable to feel either pleasure or disgust when she thinks about it. She only concludes that they're rather excessive in giving so much importance to doing it or not doing it.

So, thanks to the special nature of a house that was conceived as a brothel, Javós Delenós' two sons—both of them legionnaires sent out to the plains of the empire—the four slaves, the two apprentices, and now Junil and her father, have a bedroom each. This doesn't happen even in the homes of the town's richest patricians, where the ordinary slaves live and sleep all crowded together. The rooms are tiny, of course, windowless and their ceilings are blackened by smoke from the lanterns. In some, there must still be floating particles of seminal distillate, lubricating greases, dribbles of this and that, sweat, and saliva.

And echoes of moans, orders, and entreaties, that is if exclamations leave behind floating traces.

When she enters her room, Junil smiles but her look is serious. She's thinking that, in this labyrinth of walls and shadows, she might be able to keep out of her father's sight, thinking that she might be well away from his contempt, and that she'll be able to enjoy a few nice times when nobody's going on about her worth.

And six years go by.

FIVE

Javós, Javós, Javós

After six years, Junil is still doing what she started to do the day after coming to live in Javós' establishment: gluing sheets of papyrus together. It's an easy job but requires great precision. The sheets must fit together perfectly so they can be rolled around a wooden spine of evergreen oak or chestnut to make a book. She's not the one who rolls up the sheets. Her job is to apply the glue and press them together. She works at a big table where she can glue eight sheets in a row. When they're ready, a slave sticks the first one to the wooden spine and, slowly and carefully, starts to roll it up. Once finished, each roll will be kept in a box and it's Junil's job, when the box is closed, to stick on the label showing the title of the work and its author. She has to do this even though she can't read, but she can't make a mistake, even if she wanted to, because the slave puts only the label for the finished book in front of her.

And she's bored for these six years.

She's bored. This isn't tiring work and it offers shelter in a room that's heated in winter and airy in the summer, but she

goes about it neither wanting to do it or getting any pleasure from it. Working like this, a day of gluing is an exact repetition of the day that's just ended and of the next day to come.

It's menial work, reserved for apprentices who must learn the complete art of making books, but Junil's father only lets her do the gluing. He can decide what job she has to do because he's been the new bookseller for five years now. Her father owns the house, the workshop, the shop, and the slaves.

Javós Delenós, the laughing bookseller from the island of no snow, hasn't been there for almost five years.

Junil doesn't know what happened almost five years ago, and if anyone asked her to hazard a guess, she'd say that her father killed Javós but she doesn't know how.

It was when Javós, her father, and the slave Marmú left Nyala to travel to the capital of the neighbouring province. It was still cold but Javós didn't want to wait for the mild days at the end of spring. For some months, certain traders had been telling him that, in this town, nine or ten days away by cart, some different books had appeared. They were rectangular, so if you wanted to find a certain fragment, there was no need to start at the beginning, like you had to with the rolls. You could find it almost immediately. Neither Javós, nor Junil's father, nor Marmú could imagine what such a book would be like, so they decided to go and see. By this time, Junil's father was in charge of selling the books. He took them to the homes of the people who had ordered them and convinced those who were unsure about the need to start a collection of rolls in order to secure their prestige among neighbours and relatives alike.

They left one April morning and when they returned three days later Javós was lying dead in the cart. Junil had seen him when the four slaves brought him into the house and laid him

on the copyist's table. Silently acknowledging his death, she told him she was sorry her father had killed him.

Her father and Marmú had killed him. Junil knew this was so without having to ask any questions or waiting for someone to examine the corpse. And no one examined the corpse or asked any questions. On the morning of the second day of the journey, Javós had collapsed in the road and was rolling in the mud. His death was so sudden, Junil's father told everyone, that it could only have been caused by the spite of an irritated god. Feigning deference, he gave Marmú enough money to buy three sheep and three goats to be sacrificed to the gods as soon as Javós' body was washed and wrapped in a linen shroud. And, on the day of the funeral, he wouldn't let anyone else shout Javós! Javós! Javós! to beg him to come back, or to kiss his lips to pick up the traces of his last breath, or to put a bronze coin in his mouth to pay for his journey to the realm of shadows.

Javós' will was clear. He'd read it out aloud on the calends of September the previous year before an assembly of the patricians of the town who all bore witness. He left everything he possessed to his sons in two equal parts, plus a third equal part to Junil's father, to whom he entrusted his sons' inheritance until they finished serving in the legion. If one of them didn't return from the war, his share was to be divided between the survivor and Junil's father.

Her father's first decision was to free Marmú, giving him sufficient money to leave Nyala. Thus, Junil knew for sure that the two of them had hatched the crime. They must have poisoned Javós with a drink, perhaps laced with some euphorbia decoction or antimony powder.

Junil wondered how she'd have to pay for the new power, the new wealth, and the new prestige of her father now that he

was her master and because he was her father and owner of the bookshop. In the last few years, the price of being doubly submitted has been to do what she's been doing since she arrived in this house: gluing papyrus sheets and knowing she'll be doing this as long as she lives here. She can't imagine that it won't be long before she leaves Nyala forever.

She's sensed, without giving it much thought, that her father's rise would spare her from being prostituted. At first, he'd understood the fact of the bookshop's being installed in a former brothel was a sign from the gods, but he soon realised that if he became a pimp as well as a bookseller, he wouldn't have access to the most powerful families. The customers of the bookshop had no problem about paying for sex, but their rank obliged them to do it in a reputable brothel, and they would want no connection whatsoever, not even by allusion, with that damp, rundown slum of a place that had been reserved for low-status travellers and traders.

SIX

It's very strange that writing is a human matter

Papyrus glue is a brew of boiled ox skin, tendons, and bones. It must be warmed before use and it is then, just when it reaches the perfect point of malleability, that it stinks the most. It's a white stink that clings to Junil's hair and clothes, slips under her nails, and coats the pores of her skin. Her father likes the fact that she trails this stench of glue. It's a sign of her docility, as if she was wearing a slave collar. And, in the evenings, when he wrinkles his nose and says, Dammit, go and wash! it's to watch Junil go and do what they both know is useless. Washing her body with a solution of steeped chopped herbs will disguise the thick reek of glue only a little and not for long.

For six years, Junil has been gluing sheets of papyrus. Her father never went to the neighbouring town to see those books of sewn pages that were a marvel for anyone who saw them and opened them. Junil has no idea what the advent of this new way of making books might mean for her and only thinks about it if some traveller mentions them, frequently adding that he hasn't seen or touched them but knows someone who has seen and touched them.

What interests Junil is reading.

She's been learning to read without her father knowing. Her first teacher was Marmú, and then Threefingers, the chief copyist slave whose left hand is missing the little and ring fingers because they were chopped off one day in retribution for some mistake that only he must remember, although he never speaks of it.

The chief copyist slave is the most important person in the house after the owner. The business of selling the rolls depends on his talent for writing clear, elegant letters and his skills in teaching his craft to younger slaves. Many patricians who order copies of the

Odyssey, *Works and Days*, the *Aeneid*, and *The War of the Eunuchs* only check the rolls to be sure that the calligraphy is fine enough to show off to their guests. Very few will venture to read them, and Threefingers knows this. So, when only the other slaves or Junil can hear him, he curses these ignorant buyers with insults and profanities.

Threefingers, who is almost as old as Marmú, has strangely dark skin for these parts, and is tall although his back is crooked. He also wears a thin leather strap around his neck but his calligraphic skills have condemned him to eternal servitude. He can only wait for the day when his hands start to tremble and he'll no longer be fit to copy. He knows that, when that day comes Junil's father, who's never respected him much, will sell this old maimed, almost hunchbacked slave at a bargain price. For Threefingers, then, teaching Junil to read is both a risk and a gamble. He's risking punishment if his owner catches him but having the owner's daughter as an ally is his gamble.

And, ever since Junil started learning to read, she would have read everything if Threefingers didn't restrict her to only the things he chose. Without knowing why, Junil obeys him. In any

case, she can't read the sheets she glues together, either before or after doing so, as she can't slow down her pace of work. She sees disconnected words passing before her and knows that she mustn't look for any meaning because this will distract her and she'll do her job badly. Gluing badly means that she'll have to suffer her father's curses and insults, and especially the smirk that contorts his face when he lowers his voice to jeer at his daughter. Moreover, the sheets she glues together are rarely from the books Threefingers has suggested she should read. He takes these from the back room where Javós kept the most valuable rolls, or gives her some he has exchanged with another copyist from Nyala's other bookshop, or has had copied in the Minerva Library. Junil therefore waits until her father goes out before she starts reading, always aloud to Threefingers, who sometimes smiles or nods his head in approval.

Very soon Junil realises how hungry she is and how grateful she is to Threefingers for agreeing to feed her. Slowly, the papyruses cease to be her daily burden because sometimes they lead to the allure of the stories that are told when Junil reads fragments of Homer, Virgil, Lucretius, Horace, Milcianus, and Varro, the tragedies of Euripides, Aeschylus, Nomides, and Sophocles, the epigrams of Catullus, and the comedies of Prosepon, and Aristophanes. And every time she discovers a new author, she repeats his name aloud.

Alphanas. Alphanas.

Xenophon. Xenophon.

She tries to imagine what each author she has just discovered was like but doesn't succeed. She's never entered the Minerva Library, although she's often walked past it and stops every time before the lonely bust of Homer that guards the entrance. Whenever she tries to imagine the face of a writer,

this bust is what appears in her mind. She wonders if they all have those white eye sockets without irises or pupils and it seems reasonable that this could be the case. Someone who has to tell so many stories must need to be constantly looking inside himself to find them and bring them out, and he'd have very little time to ponder the banality of the world. When she thinks about them, all the writers resemble a marble Homer painted in bright colours that highlight the emptiness of their gaze. And she finds it hard to understand that they didn't all live in the same place at the same time. And even more strange that each one writes only what is presented with his name. Why couldn't Aristophanes have written the *Iliad* and Euripides the *Georgics*? She could almost believe that all literature is the work of just one author who, for reasons known only to himself, decides to use different names. Of course, an author like that would be of divine essence and not paying homage to him with sacrifices would be a sacrilege that could only be avoided by turning bookshops into temples and booksellers into priests. Since it is clear enough that they are not, it must mean that no god intervenes in the art of writing stories. Yet Junil often thinks that it's very strange that writing is a human matter as nothing seems more divine to her than this way of bringing people and words to life and making them live and die by means of words.

Today, however, Junil's about to make one of the most important discoveries of her life. She doesn't know this, of course. Right now, she's just glued her last papyrus sheet for the day. Right now, she's sweating, she smells bad, she's tired, and she's looking out the window more often than is good for her, trying to capture snippets of that life on the street that escapes her. She's put away the pot of glue into which her father spat, just for the sake of spitting, as he does every day, has cleaned the pig bristle

brush, and has started rubbing her hands with pumice stone to get rid of the strands of dried glue, when Threefingers comes in without her hearing him enter. He's carrying four rolls under his arm. And he's smiling.

"What have I got here?"

And Junil smiles too, as she does every time Threefingers asks this question. "A new book?"

"I haven't opened it yet…" Threefingers places the four rolls on Junil's worktable, pours some water from the bucket and takes his time drinking it. Junil knows she mustn't ask any question, that she must let Threefingers drink, wash his face and hands, dry them ceremoniously, and wait for him to speak first.

Ovid, *Ars Amatoria*.

"I've always thought that we should start with the most ancient writers so you can learn where the beauty of literature comes from. But we're going to read a living author today."

Junil has stopped breathing. She doesn't understand what she's just heard. A living author? Her legs feel a little wobbly.

Are there living authors who are worth reading? Until now, Junil has thought that literature was a legacy of earlier times when men were wise, spoke little, listened a lot, and were unstinting in their sacrifices to the gods. When satyrs, nymphs, and cyclops roamed among humans, and humans, if their lives were honourable enough, were aware that the gods came down from their realms to advise them, help them, or try to deceive them. When, from the battles and seductions between the human and divine worlds, demigods were born, and filled memory with their exploits. When the world sparkled and rumbled, and the smell of frying fish didn't float through the towns.

Nothing had prepared her to think that authors worthy of the name could exist in her own times. She knew that Javós had

written poems and prose but his works were so bad that they were proof of the impossibility of writing anything beautiful in these times. And, all of a sudden, Threefingers is showing her four rolls of work by a living author with the same fervour as if he was dead and there were statues of him in all the squares of the empire.

At the age of fourteen Junil with her skinny legs, almost non-existent breasts, hair flopping over her eyes, and a nose full of the rancid stink of glue that makes her believe that nobody ever come near her without grimacing in disgust, has fallen in love today. It comes upon her as she opens the first roll and reads. Beyond the mountains and rivers, there exists in the capital a living author who speaks of desire without trickery or falsity, who explores love, gives it names and epithets, places it before the gaze of the gods and within the reach of his readers. As she reads the advice he gives to discreet girls and dreamy boys, the diatribes he hurls at hypocrites, the remedies he prescribes for battling with melancholy and solitude, Junil knows that no one has ever gone so deep inside her. She has all Ovid's words in her.

Junil doesn't realise that she's stopped reading. Unmoving in front of her, Threefingers is silent. He's gazing at her with a with a yearning smile because he can't be with her on this suddenly silent journey along the paths of Ovid's words. He waits until she comes back and then removes all traces of the sadness that was blurring his smile.

"Let's read Ovid more often, shall we?" he murmurs.

Junil doesn't reply at once. She knows she's blushing because she feels naked. She's breathing slowly. She doesn't dare to look Threefingers in the eye for she knows that, when she's with this old, deformed slave, it must be without pretence or lies.

"Yes, let's, please... And thank you, Threefingers."

"Maybe... Maybe, from now on we don't need to read together all the time... Maybe you can keep reading this book by yourself." Sadness again crumples his smile.

"Yes, I can, You're right... I think I can manage by myself."

SEVEN

A little groping of hands

For the first time since her mother's death, Junil notes that time is tinged with impatience. And it's no longer impatience for the day to end or when she's waiting till her father goes out to look for more clients thus giving her a moment of peace, but it's the gleaming impatience of knowing that there are more books by Ovid and, thanks to Threefingers' generosity, she'll be reading them.

As she reads, a year goes by. Every time she reads Ovid's prose or verses, she feels the same languor licking at her skin and her soul. And every time, she reads alone, always in a very low murmur for fear that anyone who hears her might steal the words and, with them, her emotion. And every time, she goes to the temple to pray and offer a sacrifice. Before that, she must steal a few coins from her father to buy the white dove or pair of sparrows that she offers up to the priest's knife. Her father, always so suspicious, never realises she's robbing him, and Junil smiles when she thinks about it. Some god is protecting her and she'd wager it's Asclepius, the god of healing to whom the temple where she takes the birds is devoted. So, when she manages to

catch a mouse or a grasshopper, she sacrifices it herself at the sink where she washes and, as she's giving thanks, she knows that, beneath the name of the god, there throbs the name of Ovid.

During this year, she's barely grown and her breasts have budded only slightly. Her legs are still too spindly and her hair still flops over her eyes. She still looks like a wild thing and knows that she will continue to do so as long as she lives in the shadow of her father's fist. She rarely leaves the house, except on holidays when they bring immaculate oxen to have their throats slit in the main square, or when the priests dance and pray to inaugurate the fights and races at the start of each season. She doesn't let the boys come too near her, not even at the festivities, but she has to recognise that it doesn't seem that the smell of glue that pervades her every cell repels them as much as she thought. Twice this year she's let a boy put his hands on her breasts and kiss her neck but not for long, just a little groping of hands under her blouse and kisses that are too dry for her to work out whether the sensation of skin that is really touched is anything like what Ovid describes. She thinks not. The boys of Nyala are ham-fisted, in too much of a hurry, and their breath has the dankness of wine drunk without water.

Fifteen is too old to be unmarried but Junil's father, letting her stay on in the house without paying, uses her like kind of slave, which is why he's hasn't offered her to any of the local youths. If he thought about it at all, he'd realise that, over the years, Junil has become an increasingly intangible presence for him, a silhouette that arouses in him a vague sense of vexation or revulsion but also, at times, gratitude, which he tries to repress. Thinking about how he can be rid of her makes him feel tired. He feels a reluctance he doesn't understand but doesn't try to fight it either. He leaves her where she is.

EIGHT

They write the author's name in bold letters

While Junil is enduring her fifteen years thanks to the benevolence of Threefingers and the genius of Ovid, her father sets about establishing a business that will earn him the patricians' respect. In his seven years of working at the bookshop, he has discovered that besides his clear, neat handwriting, he is good at persuading. He understands what his customers want even before they tell him, and he offers it to them. And the whole point is always to look good, her father in the eyes of his customers, and the customers among themselves.

Like all the booksellers in the empire, her father publishes books by living and dead authors without the agreement of any of them, or any royalties being paid. It is a practice accepted by the laws of the empire and, as a result, almost all the writers are from families that are sufficiently well off for them to write without making anything from sales of their books.

The success of an author of the empire is measured, first of all, by the enthusiasm of patricians who have taken the time to read it, or who have ordered a slave to read his work to them, or

to present a summary of it. Second, it's measured by the number of copies booksellers in the capital and the big towns have to make, and by their interest in praising the author's name. Fame, then, is based in large part on the ethereality of praise, so some writers pay false readers to hail their most recent works in the bookshops, the temples, or the marketplaces. Sometimes these mercenaries write an author's name in bold letters on the walls of the most crowded squares.

These writers don't live in Nyala, which is too damp and remote for any god to endow any of its citizens with the gift of letters. Hence, any praise that circulates in Nyala never reaches the author's ears but, even so, it is no less valuable because it works as local currency. If a man praises his neighbour's acquisition of a collection of Horace's verses, he knows that this neighbour will soon praise him for having bought two tragedies by Aeschylus. If these words of praise, duly repeated, spread and become accepted as a mark of good taste, both praised and praiser will gain in fame and influence.

So it is that, one morning, Junil's father, dressed in his blue tunic and coming back from the temple where he goes whenever he can, has an idea that is so daring he has to stop stock-still, right in the middle of a crush of people. Immediately they start attacking and insulting him, and when they start spitting on his legs, he pushes his way through the mob to take refuge near a bakehouse. He's panting and he won't be able to think calmly in the midst of all this racket, so he hastens home. Once inside, he takes refuge in his room without saying a word to anyone. He even neglects to yell at the slaves and Junil.

Nyala has two bookshops, he thinks. The other one is a dirty, ramshackle place, so only his is honourable, even though it was once a brothel. The city also has a library and, most important,

is home to a tempting number of book-collector customers. In order to be complete, the town only needs a famous writer.

The writer will be him.

He'll become a writer, and he'll be successful.

He can't understand why such a clear, simple idea hasn't occurred to him before. Being a writer is the easiest thing in the world when you only have to order your copyist slave to change the name on the first sheet so you can appropriate books written by others. He'll have to give the slave some kind of inducement to make sure he keeps quiet, as well as threatening to cut off his nose, ears, and tongue if he ever says a word.

To think more clearly, he leaves his room and wanders through the narrow, meandering passageways of the house. He needs to anticipate all possibilities before he takes his chances with this venture. First, he thinks about the rival bookseller and the people in his employ. Yes, they might know if the texts aren't his, and their tongues will joyfully wag.

Although there's no law against stealing another man's work, there is a code of good manners and civil behaviour. If his customers find out, he'll be disgraced and nobody will buy his books.

So, he can't pass off the more famous books as his own but what about the others? Even if the others aren't so good, they have the advantage that no one knows them, so it won't be at all difficult to misappropriate them.

Whose books should they be?

He realises that he'll need to have read the works he sells and is frustrated at the idea that he won't be able to publish more than one false book per year, at best. Verisimilitude in literary creation takes time, and the time it will take to establish his reputation as a writer is now starting to look like an ill-spent eternity. He'll need short texts he can publish often.

Poems.

He chuckles and thumps the wall.

He'll be a poet.

He now sees everything through a haze of light and grace. The poems can circulate one at a time, and he can publish a new one every two weeks or even three a month. And it can't be too difficult to find neglected poets with a certain literary consistency. They only need to be deftly penetrating. He knows that he has only a few poems in the bookshop. They only sell the most exalted works, the ones the patricians want to try, and these are untouchable. The library, he thinks. He'll find them in the Minerva Library. And since everyone will suspect a bookseller and self-declared poet who ferrets out rolls of poetry in a library he never enters, he'll send Junil. This isn't ideal but, although he has a low opinion of her, he knows that, more than with any slave, he can count on her discretion. And it's a while now since he realised that she's secretly reading.

"Junil! Come here at once!"

NINE

Off the edge of the world

Junil is whimpering. She's whimpering and walking to the pond. She's stumbling a lot, tripping on stones, bumping into people and animals, but she doesn't apologise or look back. She just keeps whimpering and walking. When she reaches the pond, she squats by the water, as far away as possible from the huts surrounding it. She looks at the grass and animals without seeing them. She's hurried here from the library where they've just heard the news of Ovid's exile.

The emperor has banished the best poet in the universe, the best writer since Homer. He has imprisoned him in the confines of the empire so that cold and woe will do away with him. Ovid won't be publishing anymore and Junil won't be able to visit him in his mansion in the capital. She won't be able to pay her respects or give him anything and she won't be able to finish reading his work either. The orders from the capital, from the emperor himself, are that all of Ovid's writings must be destroyed. No one will be able to read anything of his, ever again.

Junil dips her hands in the water and washes her face. She starts whimpering again, blows out snot, which falls in the wa-

ter, and washes her face once more. She has to tell Threefingers about all of this.

But, a little later, when Threefingers comes back from the library where he's gone to learn more, he can only add some geographical detail to what Junil knows.

"The emperor has sent him to Tomis, in the northeast. They let me look at the map … so far away that it looks like the end of everything that exists."

There, he will hear the roaring waters of the sea falling into the void that circles the world. And maybe, when he's overwhelmed by the despair of not being able to publish, he'll throw himself off the edge of the world. Junil shudders to think about it.

She has no wish to return to the library today but doesn't want to go to the workshop either, what with her father always snooping around. When Junil goes hunting for verses, her father forbids her to stop working until she's copied enough for him to shuffle through them and create something that looks like a new poem. He doesn't want to resemble the debauched or sharp-tongued poets who swarm in the big towns, so Junil has to bring him verses expressing patriotic exaltation or benevolent love. Of honest village and modest heart, he said the first times he dared to read some of his stolen compositions, lowering his gaze before his potential customers.

Her father was invited out more and more often. They listened to him, praised him, and he saw a fortune opening up before him. It wasn't long before they were giving him silver rings and gold coins as a reward for his talent, and some of the women secretly summoned him so they could taste a writer's skin. In little more than a year of skulduggery, he has become one of Nyala's most illustrious citizens.

He no longer sells books. He has them sold by a stately slave, acquired at an exorbitant price, who does his old job of visiting the most prosperous houses to praise the newly published books. Now a famous writer, he can no longer work at any trade but must show that he spends his days lying around and meditating. He's happily given up the blue tunic for a white toga, although he doesn't yet know how to wear it very elegantly. Acting like a patrician, and without the proper rank, requires patience, determination, and a sharp eye for opportunities. He therefore sometimes accepts commissions to write verses in praise of some farsighted ancestor, or virtuous and fertile wife. And when an admirer asks him to become a combat poet, to help him with some conflict with a neighbour, stepbrother, or electoral rival, he has no choice but to agree, but always on condition that his verses remain anonymous. Junil, then, is freed for a few days from her work of gluing papyrus sheets because she must urgently find poems that can be adapted to the designs of her father's new friends. Later on, the slaves of the sponsor will go out at night to nail up the injurious poems, all over town. Junil smiles if she comes across them in the street, and sometimes stops to work out which of the verses she's rescued from the library have taken on a new life.

Her father's prestige mainly depends on Junil's ability to find forgotten poems that are easy on the eyes and ears. But Junil, now bereft of Ovid's works, won't be going back to the library today and will mumble that she hasn't read anything good when her father is surprised to find that is no papyrus on his office desk. Just before he starts haranguing her, he glimpses in his daughter's eyes the moist shadow of a new sadness, which almost intrigues him. He thinks that this sadness must be the worst punishment she can suffer right now. He shrugs and stops looking at her.

TEN

A marble statue smeared with grease

The Nyala library is a large, bright building where Junil goes so often that nobody notices her. On the blue-painted marble pediment above the bust of Homer, a pompous text recalls, in big letters, the name of the benefactor who had it built fifty years earlier and, in smaller letters, the names of his descendants who keep it open with six slaves who work and sleep there. It smells of dried papyrus and glue but Junil doesn't notice it anymore, not even when she breathes in deeply to get a whiff of the olive oil burning in the lamps, good oil, and so different from the greasy concoction they use at home to light the workshop and bedrooms. She also sniffs, with delight, at the cedar oil that protects the books from hungry insects. Thus, she associates the smell of oils with her search for poems, and every time she enters the library, she takes a long, deep breath before starting to work.

Junil has access to eight thousand papyrus rolls. They are filed along the walls in open wooden niches. Each one has a label, like the ones she sticks on when she's finished gluing the papyrus sheets in the workshop but, in addition to the title, the library rolls also show the number of the niche where they're

stored. She's no longer intimidated by this mass of papyrus surrounding her or bothered by the incessant buzzing of people reading aloud or the arguments that sometimes erupt in the neighbouring rooms where some of the most select readers get together in sessions to discuss texts. And she often smiles at the slave librarians, especially the one who made her vow, on the first day and at the feet of the statue of Minerva who contemplates the readers from her pedestal, that she wouldn't steal or damage any of the books.

Classifying the rolls depends on the good will and common sense of the librarians, who frequently disagree. The only way of not missing any book is to read the labels, one by one, niche after niche. It's tedious work, sometimes interrupted by the younger librarians or inattentive readers who offer to help. She murmurs, no need, thank you.

And so, the months have gone by.

And after several months she accepts the infusion of mint or thyme that the head slave sometimes offers her. She accepts mostly because she doesn't want to lose contact with the man who, some time ago, in a loud but wavering voice, had asked for the readers' silence and attention, whereupon he announced the end of Ovid. She wants to be his friend but doesn't know how. Before this, it hadn't occurred to her that it could be useful to have a friend, apart from her alliance with Threefingers. She sees that smiles and cautious gestures aren't enough to inspire trust.

She knows the head slave is called Lafâs, that he's the son of slaves from the south and that he's been living at the library for more than twenty years, without the right to leave, ever, because he's a votary of the goddess Minerva. The readers who make fun of him say his body should be anointed with cedar oil because his skin is so pale the insects mistake him for papyrus. He's pale-

skinned with flabby, quivery flesh but what most disturbs and repels newcomers is that his body is totally hairless, except for his eyelashes. Devotion to Minerva means he must shave his face every day, and his head and body every week. He must be nearly forty and when he is still, he looks like a marble statue smeared with grease.

Junil wants to be his friend so she can find out whether Ovid's books, now removed from the library, have been destroyed or not.

Once she's decided that she needs to know, and after thinking about it for several days, she has to recognise that the only thing she possesses that could be exchanged for information from Lafâs is her body. She's not revolted by offering herself for what she imagines copulation must be like, or by the idea of his hairless body rubbing against hers. She's sickened because she thinks she's already spent enough hours doing things she doesn't want to do, and she's sworn not to waste any more. But she also realises that being a virgin at the age of sixteen is an aberration. Almost all the other girls of her age, with whom she's never spoken, or even played with when she was small, would have had their first child by now.

One afternoon of heavy rain when the library is the noisy refuge of the offspring of patricians who can't train outdoors, and the terrified librarians are watching, no longer discreetly, to make sure that they don't damage any book, Junil takes action. She has learned by heart what she wants to say but knows she can only get the words out if she makes her mind go blank. Hence, she goes to Lafâs, stands gracelessly before him, like a boorish scion of one of the wealthy families, and says I need to speak with you right now. It's urgent and it's confidential.

From the very first day, Lafâs has been wondering why this skin-and-bones girl comes here so often to forage so meticu-

lously among the rolls and, occasionally, to get out her writing materials and copy fragments from them. He's wondered, has guessed the answer, but doesn't want to get to know her, not really, not even when a mint or thyme infusion could be the pretext for starting a conversation. Twenty years of being cloistered have cured him of many curiosities. Now he smiles, noting how Junil's posture, half turned away as if she wants to flee, contradicts the self-assurance of her tone and her words. He says, Very well, girl, come with me, as if he didn't have to protect the venerability of his office, and as if there was nothing unusual about granting the request of such an urchin.

Junil follows him, leaving the main hall and entering a windowless back room. Its walls are lined with rolls and Junil had no idea of its existence. There's no one here. Ah, she thinks, he knows what she wants.

But what she must do is speak without thinking, so as soon as Lafàs closes the door and places the lamp on a shelf, she speaks.

"I want to know something and maybe you're the only one who knows it… and if you tell me, you can have me… all of me… for an hour. At once, or when it suits you… I swear it now and I can swear it before any god you want… I want you to tell me if Ovid's books have been destroyed… or if they are hidden. If you tell me, you can have me for an hour… And if they are hidden, I want to read them… and for every roll you let me read you'll have me for another hour…"

She's said too much, too fast. She's gasping and blushes when she realises it but, trying to keep her gaze fixed on Lafàs, she sweeps her hair back so he can see her eyes and understand that she's told no lie, that she's not afraid.

Lafàs looks at her and understands that she's told no lie and that she is afraid. He sends her away.

"Girl, I want nothing of you, neither your body nor anything else you can offer. Of course, the rolls have been destroyed. All of them. What do you think we do when we receive an order from the emperor? Go, now, and don't bother me again."

He opens the door to let her flee.

ELEVEN

I know who you are

Lafàs waits six days before speaking to her again. Meanwhile, Junil has been doing what she always does in her present life: going from workshop to library, sticking papyrus sheets, hunting for overlooked poets. She doesn't hide from Threefingers the open wound of her loss of Ovid. And she tries never to speak to her father who is increasingly puffed up with his literary success.

One morning, Junil has just entered the library with ink, calamus, and sheets of papyrus in her leather pouch when Lafàs approaches. Contrary to what she did, he's chosen a day when hardly anyone is there. Before speaking, and as he always does when he's in the great hall, he looks reverently at the statue of Minerva.

"Good morning, girl. Do you want some mint tea?"

Junil's eyes let out a flash of disdain before she declines, without looking up from the papyrus sheet in front of her.

"In that case, will you let me sit with you for a moment?"

She consents with a slight nod.

Lafàs looks at her. "Ovid, eh? I must conclude that you love what he writes…

"Of course I do. What do you think! I wouldn't have gone to speak with you if I didn't."

Lafàs lowers his voice.

"You like him so much that you were willing to give me your body in exchange for reading him. Have I understood correctly?"

Junil shrugs without looking at him. A tiny smile crosses Lafàs' lips.

"I've been living here for twenty-two years, serving books and Minerva, and nobody has ever made me such a proposal... It's difficult to imagine how much you must love Ovid. Or maybe you're attracted because he is banned? But it can't be that, eh?"

"No."

"Just as I thought. But I don't recall ever seeing you reading him here. I know who you are, but don't worry. I've heard people talking about your father. You had Ovid's books in the shop, I suppose."

"Some, yes. But others came from here, to be copied. Threefingers..."

"Ah, yes, Threefingers. Well, you can't read Ovid anymore but talking about him isn't prohibited. Which of his books have you read? The ones about love?"

"No... well, those too, yes, but I've read the Daybreaks and the Heroides..."

"Very good, girl. I congratulate you. And the Metamorphoses?

"No... not that one."

Later, Lafàs will try to describe for himself how, when hearing a title she didn't know, Junil's face had changed from wary interest to barely suppressed weeping.

"Sorry, I didn't want to upset you. And which is your favourite, of all the ones you've read?"

Junil realises that she's let too many emotions seep through to the surface.

"I don't know..."

"Really?"

"Well, the Ars Amatoria, maybe, but not because I want to get married..."

"Of course, of course... Anyway, one of these days, Ovid will come back from exile and we'll have his books... Now, you'd like a little mint tea, wouldn't you? I'll have some with you."