

JESPER BLÅDER

Treasure, 2019
Oil on panel, 32 x 43 in



COURTESY DOLBY CHADWICK GALLERY

FERIT EDGÜ

The Human Smell

—Translated from the Turkish by Aron Aji

As a strange whimsy of fate and a fitting farewell to me—after I lived through this city's autumn and winter—the sky seemed to have cracked open and the rain began to pour in, mixing with the melting snow thaw on the mountains, running down the roads that the melting snow turned into mud pits, joining the river, a raging, dense mudflow that had abandoned its bed and inundated all the fields. Even the drivers of the region, who wouldn't bother chaining their tires during blizzards, had determined that the rain had made the roads impassable and spent the day at coffeehouses, doing nothing but smoking and drinking tea, listening to each other's disaster stories of winter, wolves, bears, rain, and flood that they had heard and heard and memorized. When one finished a story, another began, teacups were replenished, cigarettes rolled. Because I could find no one to play chess with, I had pulled out Chekhov's collected stories, which I had packed for the road, and managed to amaze the shop owner by drinking tea after tea with no sugar, as if in competition with the drivers. They are usually surprised to see someone who isn't one of them who can drink steeped tea nonstop like them, or can shoot and hit, or recognize a purebred horse by its eye or mane, or, more amazing still, climb on that horse and, digging his spurs in the beast's belly, ride it at a full gallop. At the same time, they feel a strange admiration for the stranger who downs ten cups of tea in a row, hits when he shoots, and knows as much about horses as they do.

The shop owner showed his admiration by constantly

replenishing my tea, even before I'd ask, and never reaching for the sugar jar, seeing that I had not touched the sugar cubes on my table. I drank my tea and enjoyed that lovely travel story of Chekhov's, *The Steppe*, that I had read who knows how many times.

Among the sedge were flying the three snipe they had seen before, and in their plaintive cries there was a note of alarm and vexation at having been driven away from the stream. The horses were steadily munching and snorting. Deniska walked about by them and, trying to appear indifferent to the cucumbers, pies, and eggs that the gentry were eating, he concentrated himself on the gadflies and horseflies that were fastening upon the horses' backs and bellies; he squashed his victims apathetically, emitting a peculiar, fiendishly triumphant, guttural sound, and when he missed them cleared his throat with an air of vexation and looked after every lucky one that escaped death.

"Deniska, where are you? Come and eat," said Kuzmitchov, heaving a deep sigh, a sign that he had had enough.

Deniska diffidently approached the mat and picked out five thick and yellow cucumbers (he did not venture to take the smaller and fresher ones), took two hard-boiled eggs that looked dark and were cracked, then irresolutely, as though afraid he might get a blow on his outstretched hand, touched a pie with his finger.

"Take them, take them," Kuzmitchov urged him on.

Deniska took the pies resolutely, and, moving some distance away, sat down on the grass with his back to the chaise. At once there was such a sound of loud munching that even the horses turned round to look suspiciously at Deniska.

"That luck of yours, Teacher," the shopkeeper said, interrupting my reading. "After so many snowstorms and blizzards, now the rain."

I closed the book and set it on the table.

"It'll pass," I said.

"Valla, even if it passes, the roads must be flooded, hard to reopen."

"We waited an entire winter, we'll wait a couple more days."

"Right."

The rain slowed down, as if waiting for this exchange to stop.

First it turned to drizzle, then stopped abruptly, as if cut with a knife.

Sümbül Mountain emerged into view, as if washed for the first time since Noah.

Above its pure-white summit, a rainbow suddenly appeared, arcing south, as if stretching over all the mountains across the region.

Astonished, the shopkeeper stared at the rainbow that appeared above Sümbül Mountain just when the rain stopped unexpectedly. "A miracle of God," he mumbled, "blessed sign."

Soon, our bus would be driving under this rainbow.

As I expected, the driver quickly seated himself at the steering wheel and pressed his horn, calling all the passengers.

I got up, reaching into my pocket to pay for all the teas I had drunk, but the shopkeeper refused me, declaring that he wouldn't take money from a teacher who had spent an entire winter in this mountain village.

"You were our guest, Teacher," he said.

That was true. I had been a guest here. I had lived a winter among them and today, on my appointed day, I was leaving.

As I said my thank-yous to the man I wouldn't see again, he said, "Don't you worry, Teacher, you'll come again. Sooner or later, these mountains call you back."

After these words, we exchanged blessings and I left. Outside it smelled of mud and damp cow dung. But there was another smell besides this mixture, which I couldn't identify. At first I thought of the damp fleece smell that emanates from the pens, but that wasn't it. Similar, but not that.

I scanned my surroundings one more time before getting on the bus. The once-empty mud-filled road was now lined on each side with crowds of men and children—I never understand how they materialize all of a sudden, flashing smiles with meanings I never know and glancing at each other, at the bus, at Sümbül Mountain and the rainbow on its peak.

I also glanced for one last time at these people, at their postures, their silence, the smile pasted on their faces, as I got on the bus.

I don't know if I will return here. But I do know that I will never forget this nature—the human vistas, the faces on the crowds of men and children lining the two sides of the road, their eyes, their lips that I will never see anywhere else—until I close my eyes for the last time.

The driver, who had plowed blindly through blizzards, was now driving the bus slowly down the incline. The tires slid and swerved as he tried to steady the steering wheel. To our right was a precipice. Down below ran the river where, in the summer, naked children and women bathed in its crystal-clear waters, those who knew how fished, those who couldn't swim drowned, the river that, in the winter, froze and, now, had breached its banks and was nothing but a yellow, seething current of mud: the Great Zab.

Chekhov in my hands, I drifted.

The greasy quilt quivered, and from beneath it appeared a child's curly head on a very thin neck; two black eyes gleamed and stared with curiosity at Yegorushka. Still sighing, Moisey Moisevitch and the Jewess went to the chest of drawers and began talking in Yiddish. Moisey Moisevitch spoke in a low bass undertone, and altogether his talk in Yiddish was like a continual "ghaal-ghaal-ghaal-ghaal . . ." while his wife answered him in a shrill voice like a turkey-cock's, and the whole effect of her talk was something like "Too-too-too-too!" While they were consulting, another little curly head on a thin neck peeped out of the greasy quilt, then a third, then a fourth . . . If Yegorushka had had a fertile imagination he might have imagined that the hundred-headed hydra was hiding under the quilt.

I came to when the bus gained speed. We had reached the plateau. The road had not flooded because it ran above the riverbed.

A little later, we stopped at the Gezne Gendarmerie, the first stop we had made on my journey to my mountain village nine months ago. Two gendarmes and a woman started talking with the driver. After voicing his objections, the driver said, "Fine, let her come."

The woman, holding a sack, got on the bus.

She walked to the back of the bus without making eye contact or talking with anyone, including the driver.

As she passed by me, she paused and peered at me. Or so I thought. My head was level with her waist.

Then and there, I experienced that third smell I had sensed and couldn't identify back when I was leaving the city, but now it lodged itself in my brain indelibly. The new passenger sat in one of the empty seats in the back. Without reserve, I turned my face and looked at her.

She looked back at me.

Sitting straight, her sack on her lap, unclear whether she was cycling a friend or an enemy, she fixed her gaze on me. I tried to smile but failed.

Facing forward, I took a deep breath.

From my seat, I could smell her smell.

It was the smell of the soil that, after a longing that might have lasted years, had suddenly lived through a day-long incessant rainfall, and, satiated, was irrevocably altered.

That was enough dreaming for one trip.

I leaned my sad, strange head against the cold window, tried to return to Chekhov's story. But in vain. She was in my mind.

Alone, a sack in hand, coming and going, where from, where to, the poor woman.

As a stranger, it certainly wasn't my place to talk to her. If a local were seated next to me, I could've talked to him, asked him my questions. But the seat next to me was empty, and those getting on the bus along the road seated themselves as far from me as they could, I suppose not to bother me.

I closed the book since I couldn't follow what I was reading. (How can someone talking to himself understand what he reads?) "You've changed," I was telling myself, "these mountains changed you."

"Not just these mountains," I said, "the people, too."

"True," I said, "but not just people, the dogs and the wolves too."

"No doubt," I said, "along with them, the long, dark nights too."

"And our long conversations too," I said.

"I'd call them outpourings," I said.

"Let's call them that," I said.

"Outpourings of the soul and the bladder on cold, snowy nights."

"Yes, both, but it's good to add one more: our readings."

"And who knows, maybe our writings as well."

"You know, we didn't write much."

"What about the letters? What about those petitions?" "Those don't count; besides, why are you reminding me of all those?"

"Because."

Who was she?

I couldn't hold back, called the driver's helper to ask who the woman was, where she was coming from, where

she was going. As if my questions were perfectly natural, the boy said: "She's an unlucky one, Teacher. Coming from Piran. Her husband said, 'You're annulled.' She's from Mus. She's traveling back there, to her village. She doesn't even have a kurus on her."

I turned to look at the back seats. Then, closing my eyes, I took a deep breath.

Arid roads, parched fields, dried-up bushes, grass, shrubs, flowerless, fruitless wild trees, dreamless sleeps, untouched women, sharpened knives, mountain fires, a fugitive fox, a wounded mountain hare, a hand touching a hand, an elegy, dying children, two elegies, news on the radio, three or four words learned from the letters you received, two or three words you taught, the steamy *yufka* flatbread brought on a platter, herbed cheese on the side, a young girl's eyes looking into your eyes, a neighing horse, a barking dog, and another, and a third, then the whole pack, then the wolves laying siege to the village, all of them, with all their colors, their presence and their absence, and the smell of humans burning my throat, here beside me, all of them were coming with me.

The Steppe, this story that resembled mine and was different, that lovely, melancholy story of travel, perhaps you know how it ends with the question:

What would that life be like?

—L.n. excerpts from the English translation of Chekhov's *The Steppe* by Constance Garnett, 1888.

Turkish author, poet, and visual artist **Ferit Edgü** has been writing for more than fifty years. He is best known for his extremely spare narrative style and austere language. Chief among Edgü's works not yet translated into English are *Winter in Hakkari*, *Summer in the Shadow of September*, *The Wounded Age*, and *Eastern Tales*. Edgü's *No One*, translated into English by Fulya Pecker, was published by Contra Mundum Press in 2015.

Aron Aji translates from the Turkish and directs the University of Iowa's MFA in Literary Translation program. His translations include Bilge Karasu's *Death in Troy* (City Lights, 2001); *The Garden of Departed Cats* (New Directions, 2003), winner of the National Translation Award; and *A Long Day's Evening* (City Lights, 2012), shortlisted for the 2013 the PEN Translation Prize.