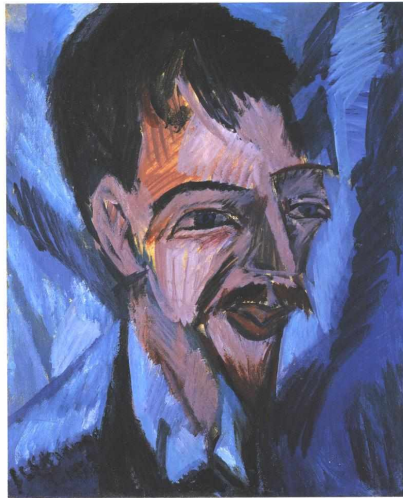


Alfred Doeblin



Beyond Alexanderplatz

ALFRED DÖBLIN

THE PILGRIM AETHERIA

Translated by C.D. Godwin

<https://beyond-alexanderplatz.com>

THE PILGRIM AETHERIA

by

Alfred Döblin (1878-1957)

written 1947-49

first published 1978

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Introduction © C D Godwin 2025

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INTRODUCTION

He considered it “the favourite of all his works”. Yet it remained unpublished in his lifetime, and still suffers almost total neglect. Now readers of English have a chance to engage with a skilfully wrought and intriguing tale.

Döblin worked on this novella for three years (1947-49). Two excerpts in a Catholic magazine were all that appeared before his death in 1957. Its first appearance in 1978, two decades later, attracted almost no attention, and since then only a handful of scholars and critics have commented on it. This is, I believe, the first translation of *The Pilgrim Aetheria* into any language. Meanwhile his most famous work, *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, continues to attract whole shelfloads of appreciation.

Yet his widow Erna assured friends that this “work of grace” was Alfred’s “favourite of all his works” (letter to Sascha and Ludwig Marcuse, 23 July 1957).

The conversion

On 30 November 1941, Alfred Döblin, his wife Erna, and their teenage son Stephan were baptised at the Roman Catholic Church of the Blessed Sacrament in Los Angeles. (Their eldest son Peter, who worked as a book designer on the East Coast, was baptised separately around the same time.) The Döblins had been taking instruction from three Jesuit priests since the start of the year, just a few months after their arrival in the USA in September 1940 – the beginning of their “second exile” after harrowing months on the run from Paris to Lisbon, as the Nazis consolidated their defeat of France.

For a year and a half Döblin insisted the conversions be kept confidential, revealed only to a few very close friends. He expected negative reactions from two sides: firstly from fellow Jews, who would be shocked by a seeming betrayal, especially given the great help Jewish organisations had provided in securing travel funds, exit and entry visas, and an employment opportunity at MGM; and secondly from other exiled intellectuals – mostly rational, irreligious children of the Enlightenment – who would find such “backsliding” hard to fathom, perhaps caused by a pathology of some kind.

He went public on 14 August 1943, at a party to celebrate his 65th birthday attended by many luminaries of the German exile community: writers, actors, scholars, musicians, people in the film business. His revelation, delivered apparently in a hesitant and impromptu manner (no record exists), was received as negatively as he had feared. Bert Brecht wrote a widely quoted poem (“*Embarrassing Incident*”) and in his work journal expressed dismay:

helli [*Brecht’s wife*] organised a party for DÖBLIN’s 65th. heinrich mann gave a wonderful opening speech, [*several others*] read from döblin’s books, sang chansons, played a kreislerian piece on the violin, and at the end döblin made a speech against moral relativism and for a solid mass of religious stuff, whereby he injured the irreligious sensibilities of most of the partygoers. a fatal feeling seized the more rational attendees, something like the understandable dismay when a fellow prisoner undergoes torture and spills the beans. of course döblin has received some especially dreadful blows: the loss of two sons in france, his unpublishable 2400-page epic [*i.e. November 1918*], angina pectoris (the great converter) and life with an uncommonly stupid and philistine wife.

The last spiteful remark no doubt reflects Brecht’s real anger at his old friend’s “backsliding.”

Thomas Mann, more sympathetically, thought rather lamely that “Jews and Catholics must have it easier” than Protestant humanists such as himself. Gottfried Benn, in an essay much

quoted by the unreligious, declared that “God is a bad stylistic principle” compared with Art. (He did not explain why Art should be a better stylistic principle.)

Döblin and religion

Döblin was born into a Jewish family in Prussian Stettin (now Polish Szczecin) in 1878. His grandparents were part of the great 19th century migration of Eastern Jews into the growing cities of the Prussian and Austrian empires. In 1928, at his induction into the Prussian Academy of Arts, he declared: “I shall never forget that I come from Jewish parents.” Yet all through his childhood the family were minimally observing. In 1912, at the time of their marriage, he and Erna formally quit the Berlin Jewish community; their first son Peter, born that year, was baptised Lutheran.

While still at school, Döblin had arrived at the profound(!) conclusion that “God is the good in the world”. His years as a medical student led him to distrust materialist explanations of human mental states. Over the next half-century he sought continually to understand human beings, their place in Nature and on the Earth, and the cosmic mystery of consciousness. His great epic novels were attempts to delve beneath everyday “realities” to deeper underlying realities – good and evil, the ways that human beings deal with Fate, and the demons that lurk in the human psyche.

During those decades, Döblin confronted issues that were clearly religious, even while he had little time for increasingly moribund organised religions. In an essay written during the First World War and published just after, he begins by expressing his frustration:

[I] carry God as an active element within me, wave him away, am ashamed of him and the myths that surround him, rage against the stigma, feel enslaved – and again he tempts, is there is there. He comes upon me like an autonomous thing I can't remove from my house – like a fellow tenant in this house, actually. But I don't want him, I have no use for him, he's inside me like a corpse. I have to find out what makes him so eternal; [...] It's not a matter of getting rid of the ghost, but of finding my way to what I'm clearly looking for, to what still clings helplessly to the corpse, the ghost, a historical flower that lost its roots and dried up long ago.

(‘Beyond God’. *Die Erhebung*, vol. 1 (1919), reprinted in *Kleine Schriften 1* (1985), pp.246-261. The following quotes are from the same essay.)

He finds official orthodoxies unsatisfying: “The world is richer and darker than those legends suppose. It's easy to free myself from them. But not from the mythical in general that lurks within them.” Organised religion deals with people as a social collective, rather than as individuals each with a soul, yearning for metaphysical explanations. His literary mind leads him to suspect the Gospels: “How can one find Jesus behind all this?” he asks, having re-read them after some years:

The fourfold presentation of essentially the same events bore the stamp of literary productions; I had the impression of standing across from authors who wrote as they felt, about whatever was weighing on the heart; goodness knows what lies behind it, and how many excerpts from contemporary anecdotes and literary products I was presented with.

During the 1920s Döblin turned to Nature in his search for understanding, producing two books on natural philosophy (*Das Ich über der Natur*, and *Unser Dasein*): prayers to the World-being by an apparent atheist. Meanwhile, on a long trip to Poland in 1924, Döblin encountered vibrant communities of unassimilated Jews, including very poor but very erudite scholars. He was also struck by the magnificent altarpiece in the cathedral at Cracow, made by the 15th century sculptor and woodcarver Veit Stoss. The sight of the Crucified Man resonated with a

religious sensibility that had expressed itself in his epics: the Daoist-flavoured *Three Leaps of Wang Lun* (1916); and *Wallenstein* (1920), which explored the base motives underlying warring Christian factions, and revealed demonic forces lurking beneath everyday reality. He dedicated *Mountains Oceans Giants* (1924) to the “Thousand-named Nameless One”, later explaining (in ‘Remarks on Mountains Oceans Giants’, 1924): “I keep saying ‘Nature’. It’s not the same as ‘God’. It’s darker, vaster than God. The total whirling secret of the world. But still something separate from God.” His later epics continue to feature demonic intrusions into the everyday world.

Döblin’s major 1938 essay *Prometheus and the Primitive* summarises several millennia of Western history as a conflict between forces that see the world as a resource for plunder, and those that view it as a source of wonder.

The reasoning behind the conversion

Conversion was not a surrender to mysticism, nor an escape from seemingly insoluble political problems. Döblin was keenly aware of historical trends and deeds. His South American trilogy *The Land without Death* (1937-38) explored the brutal impact of Enlightenment rationalism in the Conquest; contrasted it with native animism; and depicted brilliantly the efforts of Jesuits to provide native tribes with a worthwhile life on Earth, rather than baptising them simply as a prelude to slavery and death. (The anti-religious Voltaire declared the Jesuit efforts “a triumph of humanity”.)

The Jesuit enterprise in Paraguay and Brazil was cancelled by “enlightened” European rulers. Hence it seemed futile to combat ever worsening inhumanity from a secular “Enlightenment” standpoint. Concepts like Democracy and Civic Virtue and Art were no substitute for transcendent notions of active forces beyond the Self. Rather a conception of humanity made in God’s image needed to be asserted politically.

While still in Los Angeles, Döblin wrote a large work in a genre hardly known since the 18th century: a religious dialogue called *The Immortal Human*. This was well-received by churchgoing reviewers and readers when first published in West Germany, and then ignored. He also composed a substantial second dialogue, *Struggle with the Angel: a tour through the Bible*. First published posthumously in 1978, it too has been largely ignored.

The Pilgrim Aetheria

For three years (1946-49) Döblin crafted his only explicitly Christian work of fiction: this novella titled *The Pilgrim Aetheria*. It has been almost ostentatiously neglected by Döblin scholars, and has found few readers. Yet it is an artfully constructed tale, full of the author’s customary irony.

Amid the flood of scholarly works on Döblin since the 1970s, the very slight attention given to *Aetheria* has tended to dismiss it as edificatory propaganda, or as an attempt at self-justification. Its complexity has remained almost totally unexplored. Here we find themes of justice and righteousness; no simple scheme of perpetrator vs. victim; Aetheria, Simri, Pausanias are complex characters who undergo transformations. Even angels take on satanic features. Evil is shown unsparingly to be a permanent component of human existence.

Aetheria’s journey is depicted with great literary skill. Consider for example how even late in the day she reveals fateful decisions which she has concealed from earlier confessions, and maybe from herself. The line between supernatural (or divine) interventions and Aetheria’s state of mind is often blurred, right to the final depictions of the process of dying. Döblin’s narrative talent here continually walks a fine line between the supernatural (demanding total suspension of disbelief) and psychological plausibility.

I hope that this first English translation of *The Pilgrim Aetheria* will stimulate new interest in Döblin's late works, and to their relationship to his own life – Simri's decrepit condition reflects Döblin's own sufferings from Parkinsonism and other maladies – and the strange currents of European mentalities since the mid-20th century, where belief in a Primal Mind / God has been replaced by the ability to believe in anything.

C D Godwin
Stroud, UK
New Year 2025

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Part 1: The Pilgrimage to Rome

A paradisaical moonlit night

When the pilgrim Aetheria set off on her first journey to Rome – she came from Portosa, down by Salerno, south of Naples – she was in her mid-twenties, a raven-haired country beauty, robust and cheerful, warm-voiced, on good terms with all her neighbours. She was nicknamed Aetheria as a little girl on account of the transfigured, even ecstatic, expression her face sometimes wore; ordinarily she was Sabine, daughter of a fisherman. She was off to Rome at the urging of the husband she loved boundlessly, with her whole heart, with a joyful sincerity that already could scarcely be overtopped. She put her whole being into this love, and you could see, when she stood together with this man Valerio, that she felt blessed by the love he shared with her.

Valerio too was a fisherman. But like many in this region he no longer practised the profession. Here they engaged in a different, more profitable trade: from their inconspicuous robbers' nest they fell upon travellers who plied the great road to and from Naples singly or in convoy, and plundered them. They did no harm to the travellers, but word spread in the region, and merchants on their way from Sicily or Greece knew that when it came down to it, those fellows would stand no nonsense.

But on one occasion, a convoy of Greek merchants that they crept up to by night turned out to be unusually well guarded. In fact it had an escort: another bandit gang from the same region. Faces were recognised: they were men from Ravello, who had often collaborated in friendly fraternal actions. The Portosa gang, among them Valerio, Aetheria's spouse, could not believe their eyes when at the head of this train– the train they were intent on plundering, they'd been informed it was a rich one – they found the gang from Ravello, many armed with swords and shields, some even had helmets, like actual soldiers. The tail of the long wagon train was formed by a gaggle of Greeks, normally considered easy prey.

It was a gorgeous moonlit night in wooded hilly country. To the north the cone of Vesuvius soared into the clouds.

What happened?

The highwaymen from Aetheria's village crept closer one by one to check out the situation. For they hadn't reckoned on a trick like the one the men from Ravello were pulling, their monstrous knavish skulduggery in playing highway police, and against their own comrades to boot. Though no one said it out loud, their disgust was mingled with respect, which spurred them on. They meant to give their all and not fail in their mission. Contrary to their normal disposition, they were fired up and ready for a fight.

First they pushed forward a comrade (suddenly promoted to leader) to negotiate a peaceful solution involving joint plunder of the Greeks. This was not quite what the policemen had in mind: the better part of their pay was already in the bag. But the two groups, under the beady eyes of the Greeks, debated an armistice and a fifty-fifty split, the other side inclined more to two thirds and one third, meaning two thirds to themselves. The Portosa gang nevertheless agreed to this, mainly because of the disparity in weapons, and now they discussed how to go

about it: a fake assault on the train was suggested, leading to a fake fight, the Greeks would flee, and the loot could be divided.

But the wretched Greeks had to stick their noses in, they had their suspicions, being themselves experts in deceptive manoeuvres, and not easily led down the garden path.

And to crown it all the police squad, the competing gang from Ravello, those sly dogs, had chosen as their captain one Sebastian, on account of his strength and resoluteness, though not his cunning. This Sebastian, an army veteran of many wars, had suffered a broken cervical vertebra, he can't hold his head up but presses it to his chest and glowers up at everyone from below; he's actually not so dangerous, for whenever someone approaches who seems to have authority, he at once becomes a model of discipline and obedience, every time.

So when the Greek merchants turn up at his side to express concern and find out what's going on, that military sense of duty which has so often proved his undoing awakens in him and – sitting upright in the saddle as if he never was demobilised all those years ago but is still in charge of a squad – he issues the order to clear the field of these footpads here, the comrades from Portosa, send them scuttling, and no arguing.

This tone is of course unacceptable to the other lot. They have their self-respect, they feel challenged and provoked by the Ravellan's absurd presumption.

"What?" roars Valerio, spouse of that Aetheria who, once this is over, will be sent off on her journey to Rome; and again he roars "What?" and jumps back into the trees.

"Forward!" crows Sebastian behind him, casting a servile glance at the Greeks, who see that he's their man. Horses start pulling, wheels creak, the train sets itself in motion. Vesuvius looks down in silence, from here to Vesuvius and Naples takes around two days. But Aetheria's journey to Rome will take longer.

Back there in the patch of woodland, some of the Portosa gang also have horses. They set off at a furious gallop, ready for anything, even their own broken bones. Half an hour's riding and they fell a few trees across the highway to make a barricade. They wait nearby. Hard to say what they're thinking, how they see their role in the coming fight. They will fall on Sebastian's gang, put their own bones on the line, then what will be, will be.

And it is. Apart from weapons and numerical superiority, in Sebastian the Ravello gang have themselves a strategist. The triumphantly imagined battle at and around the barricade concludes – by never commencing. For Sebastian appears, his men at his back, and while they lie concealed, agog to follow events at their unassailable barricade, up he comes strolling behind and among them, and takes the astonished and dismayed colleagues from Portosa by the ears and drags them to their feet. The ones who weren't taken dashed away pell-mell like a family of hares. They stumbled, they fell down, had nowhere to hide. Utter defeat. Sebastian let most of them run off. Only two, who'd been lashing out and stabbing away savagely, all the while swearing horribly at the victors – they dared call them, in the hearing of the Greeks, "professional highwaymen" and "fake bandits" – were trussed up by Sebastian at the request of the Greeks, who wanted a souvenir of the battle.

But Aetheria's husband would not yield. His horse was driven off as they lay in wait, now he has no horse, only a dagger, and Sebastian, who owes him a reckoning, sits high on his steed and has sword and shield.

Sebastian hustled his adversary, his old comrade and partner in crime, away from the Greeks, who were sticking their noses in here too. Sebastian implored Aetheria's husband to ditch his stupid dagger, for goodness sake. He should scarper and give Aetheria his best regards – and they'll soon all be sitting amicably together once again.

But there was no helping Aetheria's husband. He danced around Sebastian's steed like a lunatic. As if warding off a bluebottle, Sebastian kept flourishing his sword to keep Valerio away from his horse and his own bare legs. The foaming insulted man below, who saw how two of his friends had been trussed and were being borne off, lunged and jabbed about him as if he too was already caught, and he wouldn't stop until – until Sebastian set the cold point of his sword to the man's sweaty throat and pressed it against the collarbone. It was like opening a hot spring. At almost the same moment Valerio opened wide his mouth as if about to ask a question, raised both arms high, and sank to his knees and then onto his face.

And that's how they brought him to Aetheria, the raven-haired beauty, his wife. She was a Christian. Later she undertook her journey to Rome, not to pray with the women of the city in the catacombs and before the bones of saints and martyrs, but to fulfil Valerio's dying wish. On that paradisaical moonlit night his wailing friends carried him all bloody into their little cottage, the man who a few short hours ago she'd sent merrily on his way. He's still breathing, he's white as chalk, can still open an eyelid.

Far, far down the highway, over hill and down dale, the merchant convoy rolls along under the protection of those locals who have earned high praise from the Greeks and will enjoy a growing reputation. Jolting between two Greek mules are the two trussed-up captives, heading for Rome to be handed over to the authorities. The victorious Greeks, who have a liking for dramatic entertainments, mean to attend their trial and execution in person. Already they sing the praises of that incorruptibility, that strict justice by which – more so than by the sword – the Romans have conquered the universe. As for the precise method by which this pair (one of them being Aetheria's younger brother) will be executed, it will surely have to be (they said this out loud) by simple beheading. But this of course will require special pleading, for in view of the gravity of their crimes – breach of the peace, armed assault on an innocuous merchant convoy – a somewhat protracted penal process might be in order.

*

Here we are in the fifth century after the birth of Christ, in an era of world history long since confined to books and libraries; which, having once filled the earth with the usual clamour, is now happy enough if some student should show a bit of interest. The mighty Roman Empire is still around at this point, though in dire straits becoming ever more dire. It's ruled by an Emperor Diocletian. He secures the frontiers, and within them is undertaking a cleansing aimed at enemies of the state of whatever stripe, among them political dissidents, common law criminals, and Christians. He throws them all to wild beasts. This is what the sensation-hungry Greeks envisage, they who have just attended an unconventional performance. They prepare themselves and their captives for a more formal and orderly spectacle at the Circus.

*

Aetheria hears what has happened from the lips of Valerio and others. She flings herself on the dying man, tries to keep him warm, intent on catching any word he's still able to breathe. It was Sebastian from Ravello who set the trap. Sebastian who struck him down. Sabine, i.e. his

wife Aetheria, must swear to avenge him. These were Valerio's last words. His hand felt for his girdle: she understood: he wants to give me his dagger. They had to drag her off the body.

Her love for him was boundless and whole-hearted. She loved him with an unsurpassable sense of bliss and intimacy. This love filled her completely, she entered completely into it. And whenever she stood at Valerio's side you could see: she felt blessed by this love, just as he was blessed by her love for him.

The pilgrimage to Rome

Next morning Aetheria demanded that the others go and hunt Sebastian down. But fear has entered their very bones, they're more inclined to hide away.

Aetheria is a Christian. That she, along with some other women in their village, had become Christians was the only source of quarrels between Valerio and her. And when she now goes about numb-faced, and tends her plot, and no longer attends clandestine prayer meetings, the women advise a pilgrimage to Rome, to the holy men, to pray with them at the sarcophagi of the martyrs, and beseech the Saviour for succour.

Eight long days after that paradisaical moonlit night they set off on their journey, their pilgrimage. This had long been desired, because of several serious ailments in the village. But Aetheria went to pray for her poor beloved husband Valerio's soul, and to implore the saints to lend her the strength to kill Sebastian.

So off they go. Five young women, peasants, off to Naples. Now and then they sing their songs. Who would think them Christians on a pilgrimage to Rome?

Hillslopes loom bright yellow as far as the eye can see: that's gorse in bloom. Dog-daisies everywhere, green groves of olive trees. Spring is dancing across the Earth, and calling out.

These women have human bodies. They wear clothes that their homeland deems proper. They nourish themselves on the food of humans. Their bread grows from the soil, their fruit from trees. When thirsty they drink water with wine. Where is there space in them for anything more? Something is growing within them that does not originate in soil, in wells, in trees, in gardens. And when they take rest and sit huddled together, they hum strange songs of Christ Jesus, sweet child of Heaven, and of Mary who conceived him. Their eyes, human eyes, glisten with joy and longing.

And if you ask: what do they look like sitting there in the shade by the roadside, you realise: they look like little birds that hop about in grass, flap into the air and light on swaying branches, and drop back down to the ground. They sing of Christ who died on the Cross, of the Son of Heaven – and Mary stands below the Cross.

They proceed through wonderful, wonderful springtime along the coast towards Rome, where Christians are killed.

*

Aetheria strode boldly along with them. Her face under the bright headband was as open as ever. Her lips that no longer kissed still swelled proud and red. Her voice that no longer breathed words of love sounded warm and placid. Her eyes saw Heaven and Earth, but not the one she so wanted to see, yet her gaze was mild and betrayed nothing. For Aetheria was

suffering terribly, her insides were in turmoil. Hatred and pain raged within her and melded to despair, to such grief that she knew not how she could go on living.

And when she had dropped off to sleep in some lodging alongside the others, she would awake, something had called shrilly to her from the darkness, who was it, she sat up trembling, her mild eyes could not see his image by day, but it came at night outlined in flame, Valerio, her beloved. She told him she couldn't live without him, and wanted to follow him so she could embrace him wherever he might be. And when the fiery image faded, she would sink back and utter passionate, urgent prayers with furrowed brow, beg for justice and success in stabbing Sebastian from behind or from the side, or killing him with a dagger to the throat.

For if she were unsuccessful, and unable to keep the oath she had sworn, and if something should happen to her brother as well, the one they'd dragged off to Rome to be condemned, then – then she would no longer call herself Christian, then Christ would have no claim on her, and she would find no justice through him.

Oh, such a long strange journey, crawling over hills and mountains along the coast and on to Naples below. The Greeks must have made their way here, the villain ahead on his horse with the bloody blade that he'd plunged into Valerio's beating breast and opened up his lovely heart. Oh the crawling along this endless path, the same path the devil on horseback had taken, sword naked at his side, and air played around it, the same air you're now breathing, and it hadn't poisoned her, and the same hot sun that now shone down saw the sword and the man who wore it openly on his steed, and didn't turn him to ashes, him and all his company and the entire convoy of Greeks. Oh, just one flame from Heaven and it would be done.

No flame came. Justice, where was justice?

They reached the broad military road, guard posts, sentries and patrols, people of many nations, whole trains of ox carts bearing foodstuffs; tollbooths.

Rome, huge, mighty, terrible Rome.

*

Enquiries led them to what they sought, they knew the names of adherents of the Christian sect. Ebonius, a spice dealer, a venerable man, Elder of the community, received the women and lodged them with friends outside the city gates. There they rested from their journey.

But Aetheria was already out and about. Where were the Greeks? What had happened to the two captives they'd abducted? The city was so big. She looked for and found their lodging place. And next day she spoke to someone on the way there – and it was Sebastian! He had caught wind of her. On a wretched little plaza they sat in a tavern. They were shown to a vacant back room. As she sat at his side, grief for her beloved Valerio overwhelmed her horribly, and fixed itself with such violence on Sebastian there in the flesh that she broke out in blind laments and sobs, and couldn't hold back even when Sebastian spoke to her. Now at last she was able to weep and lament and sob. She babbled helplessly, and was so taken hostage by misery, love and longing here in front of Sebastian in the flesh that he took her in his arms and pressed her to him and begged her, implored her, pleaded with her most ardently to calm down, and he uttered caressing words until the storm passed and she clung to his breast. Tears had come to him as well; yes, he wept along with her.

Now she was able to stand and unclasp herself from him.

He passed her a beaker of wine and she took a sip. She came to herself and saw him alive, hale and strong beside her at the table – he, the one Valerio had seen and attacked at the end and she was to pursue the fight from where it had come to a stop with Valerio, and it was her task even if he did have tears in his eyes and sniffled and drank and pressed more wine on her.

She admonished herself to remember how Valerio was carried in so pale and how he passed away and they carried him out next morning and he would never know another morning or drink wine again, and they threw hard dry clods of earth onto his coffin, onto his radiant face, his mouth.

“Come, come,” she whispered, eyes closed there beside Sebastian the murderer, she was thinking of her beloved: “come, I’ll keep my word, I shall do as I promised, come.”

Now Sebastian took her hands from her eyes and hugged her tenderly. She kept her mouth firmly shut. She squeezed her eyes shut so not a ray of light should enter, and then she prayed, prayed to God that she remain steadfast. She spoke to God, told him of her intention, and what she had to do and would do, namely grab Sebastian’s left hand that was stroking her fingers so tenderly and at the same time with her right hand draw the dagger from her skirts and stab him in the throat.

This she shared with almighty God. And she begged him for the strength to do it.

But Sebastian thought she was looking for more and stronger consoling. And so he gently took control of her right hand as well, and her right arm that she’d meant to keep free. But she tore herself away and plumped both elbows obstinately on the tabletop and buried her head in her hands and once again explained her predicament to Christ in all urgency, and implored him most intently to lend her the strength to grab the dagger from her skirts and plunge it into Sebastian’s throat.

These brusque movements dismayed Sebastian, and in order to ascertain her mood he attempted renewed approaching and comforting. But she, being likewise disappointed and annoyed, having thus far been left in the lurch by Heaven, directed her anger at him, he understands nothing, for he’s been nice to her and wants to be even more tender, and that’s all the thanks she has. Out of nowhere she heaped invective on his head, called him and his friends robbers and murderers, and this so loudly that they must have heard it from the barroom next door. And now she boxed his ears, and he lost his temper and delivered (albeit regretfully) two great smacks on the mouth that knocked her back on her stool and brought her blood to a boil.

Without further ado her hand found its way to her skirts and the dagger. She leaned back, leaned forward and stabbed and stabbed – into thin air. She tumbled, arms outstretched, stool and dagger and all, backwards onto the floor.

For the move towards her skirts had not escaped the seasoned veteran’s notice. All he’d done was lean forward slightly, hook a leg under her stool, and send her flying out of the saddle. The dagger clattered from her opened hand onto the floorboards.

Sebastian leaned down. “Look at that,” he growled, now sober, and shoved it into his girdle alongside his own. He stood glaring angrily as she clambered to her feet. He offered no assistance. With a curse he grabbed his beaker and emptied it into his mouth. He glared at her again, and turned towards the door.

She was alone at the table. She whimpered to the knotty wood: “Valerio, beloved, what should I do?”

To Christ she had prayed at home, on the road, in Rome, and here at this table. Now this.

The landlord appeared with customers. She had to leave.

Aetheria lodges a complaint

Christians came together in great stealth. This Emperor was crueller than his predecessors.

Why did he want to crush the Christians? He had no understanding of their doctrine, it was beyond him, he felt comfortable in his heathendom. But they were presumptuous with their know-it-all attitude, and undermined his authority with their prating of a god who sent his son down to Earth and was greater even than the Roman Emperor. He was in no way prepared to tolerate such talk, not least because this Son of God revered by the Christians, as they themselves had to admit, had been unceremoniously put to death without being able to demonstrate any of his powers, hundreds of years ago, under Tiberius, and his native land was still even today under the sway of Rome.

These universally acknowledged facts led the Emperor to have Christians locked up or banished, beheaded or thrown to wild beasts. That with these measures he was on the right track was evident in the security of the Empire and good progress in every province of the New Order.

What Aetheria, torn by grief as she was, mourning the husband they’d taken from her, a firestorm of longing, outrage and accusation – what she now wanted of the community of true believers here in Rome can easily be surmised.

She wanted to lodge a complaint. She wanted to bring her case before the Elder, the pastor of the community, and make her accusation. Yes, she meant to lay an accusation against her God, she had been remiss in nothing towards him, neither in the good years when Valerio was alive, nor after the calamity. Day and night – whole nights and days – she had prayed and beseeched, had laid siege to God that he might help her. But God, to whose faith she had converted and thereby brought the sole bone of contention into her marriage with Valerio – he would not listen.

Now she meant to confess to the Elder, the pastor, what had happened in the tavern, and wanted to tell everyone so that their eyes would be opened.

Thus primed and purposeful did Aetheria – complainant, accuser, widow, sturdy young peasant woman – present herself along with her companions to the spice dealer Ebonius, he in whom the office of Elder was vested and who set aside in his storerooms a place for meetings. While the others, eager to kneel before the relics he safeguarded, filed into the strongly spice-scented space, Aetheria stood before long-bearded Ebonius by the wall of his living room, sobbing and pointing to the scratches on her face and the purple patches on her arm from the mistreatment inflicted on her by Sebastian, who happened to be in Rome. She willingly admitted and confessed all this to the venerable Ebonius, for she knows, she really does, you’re not allowed to keep anything secret in confession, and it would only cause Valerio, her passionately beloved husband, her only friend in life, only cause him hurt, even more hurt, because he didn’t want to accept the holy faith and she knows he’s burning right now in the

fires of Hell. He's dead, stabbed by that same Sebastian who's here in Rome at this very moment with some Greek merchants who hired him to protect their wares. Valerio used to work with him, and everything went along fine and they were good friends and Sebastian even visited them, lots of times. But this time the Greeks paid Sebastian an enormous sum, and so he didn't hold back from stiking his friend, her Valerio, dead.

Aetheria's laments and wailing echoed horribly through the venerable man's living room.

"What is it? What is it?" the kindly old man had to interrupt her. What had led to all this? He was accustomed to verbose drawn-out confessions where it took ages to arrive at the heart of the matter. But this explosive young woman's confession threatened to take on a dangerous dimension. He still had no idea how the friendship between those two men, the death of this woman's husband, her furious agitation, and the clips on the jaw she'd received from the murderer all came together, or what he was supposed to do about it.

"What is it, my child, what is it? You've lost your husband? You loved him very much?"

At last he brought her to the point where she was able to speak of a certain specific aspect of the case. She mentioned the dagger Valerio gave her as he died. With this dagger hidden in her skirts she'd followed the merchant convoy to Rome. She'd found the Greeks at their lodgings, and Sebastian was never out of her sight. And then it came to the meeting in the tavern that she'd spoken of. The bandit had other intentions as he sat by her side.

"But I – I took hold of my dagger, and then – "

"You – ?"

"What?"

"You killed him? Speak, Aetheria. We are alone. Unburden your heart."

She gave a sob, blew her nose, stammered. He couldn't make out a single word.

"Speak, my child. Here is the place where you must speak."

She saw in front of her the dead beloved, soul of her soul, burning. In despair she stammered: "I couldn't do it. And I prayed so much. He was sitting right there beside me, I could have done it easy as anything. But – I couldn't. God did not lend me the strength."

Ebonius silently took all this in and tugged at his mighty beard. His house was often host to curious characters from the south, from the provinces, but here was a very special case. He sent out a cautious feeler: "You say you are a Christian? Who baptised you? When?"

She provided the information.

"And what did you do in the tavern? What happened?"

"He grabbed hold of me, and I smacked him to make him leave me be, and he gave me back a one-two so I fell off the stool. And then I got hold of the dagger, and then – "

"Quickly now, child. The others are waiting for us."

"He bent down and pulled the stool out from under me, the bandit, and I went sprawling, and he took the dagger off me and he swore and then he left."

"So nothing happened," the venerable man murmured, puzzled and relieved.

“Nothing,” she sobbed. “But – he took my dagger.”

“Well, well,” he murmured. His hand remained tangled in his beard. “So, Aetheria my daughter, you have suffered a heavy grief. You have lost your husband. You and all of us shall pray for his soul. And now you have encountered the unlucky man who shall suffer God’s judgement. You complain of mistreatment. But God has preserved you from worse. Praise God for all he has placed upon you. He knows better than you what is good for you.”

“I prayed to him, on my knees, on my face, at home, when they brought Valerio to me. I begged God to let him live. But he died. Ever since Valerio’s no longer with me, ever since he was laid in the ground, I haven’t let a single hour pass without turning to God, without calling him the greatest and strongest and the only true god, the god above all gods and above the Emperor, and prayed for his help in my greatest need. I prayed for strength. Because Sebastian has to die and can’t be allowed to go on living. Before I went into the tavern and actually in the tavern itself, I prayed with my right hand on the dagger. God must have understood what I wanted and why I beseeched him to relieve my distress.”

Ebonius was no longer listening. He forced himself to remain calm, stood up. This peasant from the Salerno region actually came here, undertook the long journey to Rome, in order to kill the man who slew her husband, who must also have been a highwayman. And now she complains that matters did not turn out as she hoped. Ebonius slid both hands under his wide silken girdle. He maintained his self-control and regarded the ardent simple woman. God had heard her prayers, and quite clearly had protected her.

He raised the peasant woman to her feet – she had sunk to her knees and was holding up an anxious imploring hand – oh, she suffered, how she suffered. He pulled her by the shoulders and consoled her like a father. He made no mention of what she had said. He invited her to come join the others. There they would pray before the bones of martyrs most recently tortured and beheaded here in Rome. Their deaths had earned them a place in the kingdom of Heaven, and through them plentiful mercies would flow down upon any who turned to receive them.

How cleverly this worldly-wise man spoke to her. He saw she was a believer, even if still in the antechamber of faith. He led her to the others.

There they prayed until late into the night. Ebonius spoke of the words and deeds of Christ when on the third day he rose from the dead but had not yet ascended to Heaven. He spoke of the joyful singing of the angels when they saw the stone rolled away from the grave by no man’s hand, and Jesus emerged. The angels called out that he might come to them. Jesus spoke, greeted them; he would linger a little while among his disciples, who were distraught after his crucifixion. He would raise them up, and teach them. He could not yet leave them, leave people behind.

Later a woman sang a song of the martyrs present here. Towards morning one woman after another began to twitch and babble in ecstasy, speaking to invisible beings.

Aetheria was the first to rejoice so, to twitch and throw herself about.

*

But Ebonius the spice dealer could not put aside Aetheria’s report. And instead of taking himself off to bed like the others, he slipped down the grey dawn streets to Psittakos, a freed

slave, a caretaker, an adherent of the faith. They discussed the case. Ebonius feared that Aetheria would be impelled to an assault on the man she was stalking, which would rebound on the heads of Christians.

One morning the two men found an excuse to detain the pilgrim women, and Ebonius again called his strange confessant, the passion of whose prayers intrigued him, to come to him. Now she was once again sullen and uncertain. She was still obsessed with the bandit called Sebastian, and how she might run him to ground, and inspected herself to see if she had gained courage after her devotions in the presence of the relics; it seemed not.

Ebonius now turned to the other women and questioned them all together and confirmed what Psittakos, that merry prosperous man, had whispered to him in passing as he left: they're all cut from the same cloth. The peasant women know of Aetheria's plan and they totally back her goal. They all think it a done deal, she'll never let it rest.

Ebonius wrung his hands. Why had Psittakos left so soon. Instead of paying heed to his tenets and teachings, instead of maintaining contrite silence and vowing to reform, the whole gaggle of young females thronged around him shouting and protesting that the affair had nothing to do with religion. No one in the city of Rome could possibly understand. Only someone from the Salerno region was competent to judge. They gathered Aetheria, who stood mutely by, into their midst, hurled accusations at venerable Ebonius, consoled the widow, she really mustn't let it muddle her head – all this loudly in the hearing of the kindly man transfixed in his astonishment.

In sorrow he had to let this strange provincial company of devotees go their way. He calmed himself before the bones of the martyrs. In the morning he would betake himself to the lodging of the rabid peasant woman and see how he might bring her under control.

There was no need. Before he even stepped out to set the women aright, Aetheria appeared, Aetheria herself, here before him. This time blithe and lively, she literally stormed into his shop. And without further ado she pulled venerable, greatly astonished, happily surprised Ebonius from his shop into the back room where she had made her first sad confession; and while her hand still rested on the doorlatch, she showed him in her left hand – a dagger. She laughed, beamed at Ebonius. Yes, she has it, the dagger's back. Sebastian brought it to her.

She gushed: "He came. He brought it to me himself. How great is our God. Our God is the greatest. Christ is lord of the whole world."

She knelt down and praised God and thanked him and raised the dagger high. She stood up and pressed the dagger like a baby to her breast. "God has heard me."

Again Ebonius had to control himself. This was dreadful news. He felt revulsion, his anger was great. She spluttered: "Sebastian came and was so small, so crestfallen. I'd never seen him like that. He was afraid. Yesterday he hit me. Today he chases after me and begs me not to bear a grudge." Then all of a sudden she fell silent, her face grew sombre, her gaze fell on the dagger. She started to cry, with both hands pressed the dagger to her brow.

She wailed so loudly that he ran to close the street door. When he came back she was sitting disconsolate, crying into her hands. He passed her a kerchief for her tears. She sobbed and thanked him and said again: "Sebastian told me how he'd told Valerio he'd better go, he'd better put the dagger away, or else he'd leave him no alternative. Yes. He promised Valerio

that if he left he'd give him half the proceeds, all he has to do is go. And then a quarrel started up, Sebastian says, and his hand slipped."

She sat head bowed and let her tears flow. They fell onto the kerchief in her lap. With a shake of the head he regarded the young person who'd swept into his house and still, it seemed, gave herself to silent melancholy.

He opened the shop door again and sat by her. She looked at him and really, she smiled at him. "He's going to bring me a bolt of silk tomorrow morning. Yes, he's going to bring it. And it would never have got so bad if Valerio wasn't so obstinate. He was really sorry. They were all so sorry. But now he's dead, my Valerio's dead."

She gave Ebonius a quizzical look, like a child: "What should I do now?"

She was eager to hear. A rock fell away from his heart.

She: "My friends tell me I must go through with it, since I promised before he died."

"And you?"

She jumped to her feet and knelt and praised God in childish terms and thanked him and pleaded: "I'd rather not have to kill him. Oh, take this from me."

Some distress and uncertainty stayed with her, which he was unable to dispel. He lectured her for an hour on how one must bear one's sorrows and love even one's enemies.

She had placed the dagger on the table behind her. She made to leave. But at the door she stopped and turned to him.

He must give her the dagger.

*

What led Sebastian to bring the dagger back to her?

Immediately after the notorious fight scene, the veteran, yet one more victory under his belt, this one in the most absurd circumstances, marched straight back from the tavern to the Greeks' lodging, to announce this latest triumph to his assembled friends, and tell them about the trick that the lovely sweet Aetheria they all knew tried to play on him, and how he unsaddled her. His boasting was not well received. They almost lynched him. For only now did they learn for the first time that the Aetheria they all knew and esteemed was a widow, and that on that paradisaical night during the skirmish on the road between Salerno and Naples someone had lost his life – namely Valerio, whom they had all loved dearly. All for this gaggle of Greek merchants and rascals was our renowned Valerio was, and lovely Aetheria robbed of her husband. If this news ever became known at home, they would never be able to show their faces to their very own wives.

Sebastian, unprepared for such a reception, declared his innocence in the matter. All he'd intended was simply to give Valerio a little memento when he refused to back off. But amid the curses they hurled at Sebastian, the gang decided to do without delay what they had long planned, namely first, set their two captives free, second, loot even more comprehensively the store of goods they had escorted here, as justified by the new circumstances, and third, send Sebastian to Aetheria with a gift of money, a peace offering, and an assurance of their condolences. Sebastian, the veteran who'd never received so much as a scratch, complied with

the collective demand to carry out this mission. He was given one further task: to take back to the widow Valerio's dagger that he'd taken from her, and apologise.

So it was that next afternoon, before Ebonius had got around to visiting the women in order to calm them, reassure them and change their minds, Aetheria turned up more blithe and cheerful than he'd ever seen her. Just by looking you could see she brought happy news.

The widow Aetheria – Sabine – was overjoyed to learn that the pair held captive by the Greeks had been set free, on the very day when the Greeks were going to turn them in for judgement. Further details were supplied by two members of this gang well known to her, who brought her that same day, in earnest of the truth of their tale, a heavy bolt of silk and several flagons of good Greek wine, which they left with the widow in propitiation.

But it was Sebastian who put icing on the cake. He followed the two abductees on foot, and in the name of his friends and at their behest expressed to Aetheria yet again his and their regret, indeed anguish, at the unintentional and really inadvertent grief she had been caused.

Sebastian, stoop-necked veteran, observing that she received them with no indication of hostility, described once again the dreadful situation on that paradisaical moonlit night, and how it all came to pass, and he feels himself innocent, for he's an experienced warrior, and if he means to kill someone he darn well knows it, and if not, he knows that too.

She seemed content with this explanation, and shared with him a beaker of the Greek wine she'd just received, and then another.

Sebastian said more: they've broken with the Greeks, who have lots of coin but all in all have shown themselves to be of bad character, domineering, also rabble-rousers, as revealed during the skirmish.

Then he left.

Conversations

And then she, the widow, sat there in Rome with her misery and her dagger.

Together with the other Portosa women, she visited the Circus where her brother was to have been delivered up to wild beasts to be eaten. With horror she saw several Christians, women among them, torn to pieces. The city's an atrocious place, alien and sinister.

She attended the requiem held by Ebonius for the souls of those torn apart at the Circus: "Christ, King of Glory, preserve the souls of the faithful from the torments of Hell and from the abyssal underworld. Preserve them from the jaws of lions, that they may not be plunged into darkness."

But Valerio had died an unbeliever. In his prayer Ebonius uttered his name too. She was stunned. Someone's speaking to him, he's here.

*

The Portosan women were lodged with country people outside the city gates. Ebonius visited them there. On the way back he chatted with ever-cheerful Psittakos, the caretaker.

"I've just been outside, where I saw and spoke with Aetheria, the widow who has caused so much mischief. I sought her out, because you and I both thought it unsettling to see her make

so little use of her time here. She so seldom goes in the company of her friends when they visit the city and come to us, but prefers to stay out there by herself."

Psittakos: "Maybe she prays privately. I gave her a scrap from the dress pious Agape wore when she was beheaded."

Ebonius: "It's my impression she does little praying."

Psittakos: "Did she mention anything of her earlier – intention?"

Ebonius: "Not in so many words. But she thinks about it."

Psittakos: "It grieves me to hear this."

Ebonius: "Me too, Psittakos."

Both gazed at the ground.

Ebonius: "If matters stood with her yet as I saw them several weeks ago, when she first spoke to me of her calamity and expressed vengeful intent, I would simply feel sorry for her. I would tell myself: she is from the south, she is baptised, but knows nothing of our faith."

Psittakos: "It would astonish me, Ebonius, to hear that you have altered your opinion."

Ebonius: "But I have. She – knows about Christianity, and God knows about her faith. He saved her from committing murder."

Psittakos: "You are right."

Ebonius: "He's weakening her will, and she notices. The more she prays, the weaker her evil spirit. But she hasn't put two and two together. She prays for the strength to commit murder. All she sees is her inability to avenge her husband, whom she loved so inordinately. She really should feel blessed in that love. She doesn't. She stands transfixed, out there by the cottage, like Hecuba when she lost her children. She glances at you and from her mouth you hear only that she sees herself cursed, complicit, because she cannot save her husband from Hell."

Psittakos: "He was not a Christian."

Ebonius: "No."

Psittakos: "How awful. So it's still the case that she is baptised but knows nothing of Christianity. Why then do you not bring her to understand that God has already saved her?"

Ebonius: "You try. Speak to her. You'll see. Anyway, she's no different from those other women. All from that region have the same notion, and baptism does not alter it. She must act out what she has sworn to do. That's why the others leave her so callously alone out here: they're annoyed with her. Be sure of it: she embarrasses them. When they are all back home she'll not have an easy time among them."

Psittakos: "How wretched."

Ebonius: "They consider Aetheria's behaviour scandalous."

Psittakos: "Then they're no Christians, Ebonius. So let us two state our view clearly, in their hearing. Let us threaten to remove our hand from them, and expel them from our community."

Ebonius: "You would cast them into the desert? They are strayed sheep. Aetheria – is being tested. God has presented her with a trial. Up to that point she knew only love. It seems to her

that by taking away her love, everything has been taken. She still does not understand. What would we be without trials? Animals.”

Psittakos: “How will you deal with this?”

Ebonius: “I trust the One who saved her from committing murder will show her the way.”

Psittakos: “Let’s invite her to come to us in the city, and lodge with our families.”

Ebonius: “I too thought of this.”

Psittakos: “I’ll take her under my wing once her friends depart, if she’s willing to stay.”

Ebonius: “And when she asks why she should stay, how will you answer?”

Psittakos: “Stay, because we need your help. We Christians are under grave threat. We are hunted down. We need clever people to go about and alert us whenever danger threatens.”

Ebonius: “You will say this to her?”

Psittakos: “It’ll shake her out of herself. She’s being buried – as if the dead man is dragging her down to him.

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Ten weeks in Rome.

She lodges with Psittakos’ family.

Pays visits in the city.

*

Psittakos: “You’ve seen how she can be happy. She’s becoming herself again. It’s letting go of her. You cleared the room beside the children’s room for her. She saw the flowers.”

Hortensia: “She’s a child. So are her friends. What kind of people are they down there by Vesuvius. I’m glad the others are leaving soon. It’ll be easier to engage with her. She’ll open up. At the moment her mouth is sealed.”

Psittakos: “Her heart.”

Hortensia: “My first impression was that she’s possessed by a devil.”

Psittakos: “Don’t say that!”

Hortensia: “You thought so too.”

Psittakos: “Don’t say it. Don’t think it.”

Hortensia: “But if you fear it is so, you must drive the devil out. She could harm us.”

Psittakos: “What are you saying.”

Hortensia: “Are there no devils? There are devils. Thousands of devils. Our Saviour knew them. The apostles knew them too. What has happened to us that we no longer see devils? Psittakos, we’re in a bad way when we can no longer recognise devils. We push everything onto human beings. Maybe you condemn Aetheria. But if she has a devil in her, and he closes up her mouth? She must be helped.”

Psittakos: “What notions women do have.”

Hortensia: “Ha, we’re not meant to have notions. And if we do, then they’re meant to be yours. Think: her husband was taken away. She opened up to me once, said she loved him beyond words. I’ve never forgotten her expression as she lifted her head – she was sitting just across from me – she’d been staring all along at the table. Now she lifted her head and opened her eyes wide and looked at me. Such a big silent gaze, such pain, so quizzical: ‘I loved him beyond words’. They were one body and one soul. Now it’s been cut in half. They were not granted a child. Oh, Psittakos, how mysterious, how dreadfully stern is our God to us poor creatures: not to grant a child where he is so beloved, seemingly beyond all bounds. We’re not allowed to be too happy.”

Psittakos: “You’ve said it. Her grief is enormous – bigger than her faith.”

Hortensia: “Now leave her with me for a while.”

*

Psittakos spoke a second time with venerable Ebonius.

Psittakos: “Yesterday noon I came by your shop. I peeped in. The shop was open. It was empty. You sat in shadow, not moving.

Ebonius: “I saw you.”

Psittakos: “You did not greet me.”

Ebonius: “I was thinking. Forgive me for not greeting you, not inviting you to step in.”

Psittakos: “What was on your mind, Ebonius, my old true friend?

Ebonius: “The problem of righteousness.”

Psittakos: “Can you speak with me now?”

Ebonius: “I can.”

Psittakos: “What is this problem of righteousness that bothered you so that you sat mute in a corner of your shop, and never moved in a long while?”

Ebonius: “I was unable to solve the problem, even though it’s so urgent. We are Romans. We live under the laws of the Roman Empire, which establish order among peoples.”

Psittakos: “Our justice is renowned.”

Ebonius: “It was created by heathens. How then can it be justice?”

Psittakos: “You pondered a long while on the problem of righteousness. What, my old true friend Ebonius, led you to this problem?”

Ebonius: “Aetheria, our protégée, came to me. She was with me just before you tiptoed into the shop, peered about and spotted me in the corner. I thought perhaps you’d bumped into her, and I’d have been able to pursue the conversation right away, but I had to gather my wits.”

Psittakos: “How was it expressed, this problem that Aetheria posed and left you speechless?”

Ebonius: “I started with: The Lord has given, and the Lord has taken away, praised be the name of the Lord. She responded: Then justice is no more.”

Psittakos: “She always thinks and speaks like that. She has only one idea. She lacks humility.”

Ebonius: “She said to me: ‘You tried to take my dagger away, and told me I wasn’t allowed to kill Sebastian. And you forbade me to kill myself.’ I countered with: ‘That is as it should be, because your life was bestowed by the Lord.’ To which Aetheria: ‘But Sebastian’s allowed to throw away a man’s life?’ To which I: ‘He did not intend to throw it away.’ Then she stared hard at me, at first said nothing, and then: ‘Better if he had done it intentionally.’ I: ‘Why?’ She: ‘Because now it’s not Sebastian who killed my husband, but God.’ I was outraged. I told her to keep silent for a while. She sat there calmly, without fear. I asked her: ‘Do you want to cast off your faith, and revert to ignorance and the worship of idols?’ She: “I was at the Forum, and saw how justice is done. It was all quite open. The crime was confirmed, the statute was read out, the accuser demanded the penalty, the defendant sought to reduce it. The verdict was pronounced, on the open Forum, in the presence of the accuser and the accused. There could be no injustice. It had to be evident to all those standing around that no injustice would be tolerated. The victim received satisfaction ... You spoke to me of mercy.”

Psittakos: “She said this?”

Ebonius: “Word for word. She went on: ‘Right at the start of this process, even before I could bring the case before the law, you spoke to me of mercy.’”

Psittakos: “She’s wicked, she must be possessed. She should be kept at a distance.”

Ebonius: “And throw this burning brand into someone else’s house? I spoke to her, without becoming agitated: ‘You can find that kind of justice at the Forum, here or in your home town. The Emperor has his officials everywhere, the law is the same throughout the Empire. And then Sebastian, whom you accuse, would be interrogated and – let off, because as you say, he was hired to protect the Greek merchant convoy. There you would have the justice you seek.’ She: ‘Why shouldn’t I take my case to the Forum? It’s between me and Sebastian. And if it turns out as you say, and he asserts that he didn’t mean to kill, but Valerio has been killed all the same, then – it’s all settled between us. So, Father Ebonius, it would be exactly as you laid out for me at our first conversation. So it would then be between me and God. The Lord gave, and the Lord took away ...’ She never finished the sentence. I pointed this out to her. I pressed her and asked if perhaps she did not know how to finish it.”

Psittakos: “And? What did she say?”

Ebonius: “It’s hard, Psittikos, to recount to you, who like me are so concerned with saving souls, how the conversation ended. Her lips remained sealed. I could not wrest an ending from her. She left me soon after. You didn’t bump onto her. But she saw you, and avoided you.”

Psittakos: “She lives with us in a room next to the children’s room. Hortense places flowers there every day, to cheer her up.”

Ebonius: “Don’t be alarmed, Psittakos. She made an offhand remark: If God took her Valerio, then it was a worse punishment than that suffered by the condemned in the Circus, for they were torn apart by wild beasts, suffered a terrible death, but the agony was soon over. But she, she’s torn apart every day. And how is she guilty? What was her crime? Then I appealed to her experience and her insight. I asked her if anything of the sort had ever happened to others in her village, or any neighbouring village. She almost screamed at me: ‘What do you mean? Of course it happens to lots of people. They have bad luck, suffer when it comes, and then it passes like a thunderstorm, or an eruption of the fire-mountain. They’re dull-witted and remain dull-witted. Nothing hurts them deeply, nothing, no, nothing cuts

them to the very quick.’ To which I asked: ‘Aetheria, have you noticed how we care for you? Do you not see how we grieve with you? You’re our daughter, our sister. We too feel your suffering, and are saddened when we see you. We are trying to set you right.’

“‘Why should you!’ she screamed. ‘You shouldn’t. You all want it forgotten. You want to take it from me. I’m to be stupid and unfeeling and ignorant like the others.’ And she stands up, steps close to me and wags a finger in my face: ‘How can you do this, Father Ebonius, you, the Elder here of the Christian community, how can you take my misfortune away from me and leave me stupid and ignorant and shameful?’

“I remained calm. At moments she seemed crazed. I alluded to our duty to stand by one another. And that was the nadir of our conversation. She clapped hands to her face and – laughed. She sat down, still laughing. I kept calm and asked: ‘Why do you laugh, Aetheria?’

“At once she lowered her hands, came close and apologised. I had to stop her kneeling before me. She begged: ‘It just happens, Father Ebonius. I don’t want to, it just comes over me.’

“‘Speak, my daughter, tell me why you laughed.’

“She sighed: ‘Father, once I was like the others. If some blow came, I’d accept it and wait for a bit and it would be better. Now, it’s too much, too much for me. I have a dreadful secret to reveal, Father Ebonius. I’ve never told anyone. Back then I found Valerio, we fell in love. We had no children. I was a heathen and prayed to my gods and his, and begged them not to grant us children. I wanted Valerio and no one else between us. They granted my wish. And so we lived happily, blissfully, Valerio and I, more than happy, a single flame – and it scared me. I sacrificed all I had to our idols. I went around and asked the old people what our idols wanted from me, how to avert their wrath. Valerio had no idea how much of our meagre holdings went to these old people so they could make sure it reached the idols in the proper manner. I was afraid for Valerio. Then when I heard about the true God and a man from Syria came through our village and did baptisms in Jesus’ name, I was glad and ran to him. Lots of women took baptism, I did too. How happy I was to be a Christian and devote my whole heart to the Son of God who spilled his blood to save us. All at once I – had no more fear.’

“I asked: ‘And then?’ She nodded, gazed helplessly at me like a tormented child, and asked: ‘Father Ebonius, why? Why? The idols did not spare me, and Jesus Christ ...’ Oh, my dear Psittikos, how it moved me. She importuned me no more.”

Psittakos: “Hear me, brother Ebonius. I see ever more clearly the whole dreadful situation. God our almighty Father, to whom she has devoted herself, but with reservations, with concealed intentions ... God our almighty Father, who sees into everything, He is reaching out to her. Now He wants her, all of her. Of each of us He wants our all. In her own way she has admitted God into her. But it is no game.”

Ebonius: “So what now?”

Psittakos: “He draws her to Him, in His own way. He heaps punishment after punishment onto her. He tore her asunder by taking her husband and leaving her alive. He punishes her by taking away her faith. Faith is embedded in her like a spear. She tries to pull it from her soul. But she cannot.”

Ebonius: “What an interpretation, brother Psittakos! It seems you have clear vision. And can you explain why, in your view, this has been hung over her?”

Psittakos: "Because God loves her."

Ebonius: "How?"

Psittakos: "He must love her more than you or me."

Ebonius: "So that is how you see it, my brother Psittakos. Let us go soon to pray with her together, lest we be remiss in our support."

Psittakos: "We must be patient. She's still lodging at my place."

Ebonius: "Let me know when she becomes a burden to your family. Then I'll take her in."

Departure from Rome

The pious community in Rome felt relieved when the women from the Salerno region declared their intention to quit the city – this city of Caesar Imperator – and return home. They had had their fill of praying and praying before the bones of saints. Blessings and great mercies would surely come upon them, and they would take these on their way and carry back to their villages whatever they had acquired here.

Ebonius shared his thoughts with his brother Psittakos when he heard they were leaving:

"Is it the difference between town and country, is it the contrast between Rome and that region around Vesuvius? There is something repellent about these women who made a pilgrimage here from Salerno and kept up their pious zeal to the end. They are Christians and attract new people, but they remind one of chicks that carry the broken eggshell around with them. Their birthplace, the landscape, the whole unknown heathen landscape clings to them, that fire-breathing mountain, the sea, olive trees, wine. And so they sit in their villages, work, sing, dance, hold festivals – and once upon a time they heard from a Syrian emissary about the true God and our Saviour, of him who allowed himself to die for love of humanity. They learned of his miracles, of the Virgin Mary and of Joseph, and it impresses the women and they drop their tools and fold their horny hands, and instead of rude songs, their lips now murmur gentle prayers, sweet humble pleas to heavenly beings and intercessors. Thus do they give themselves to the faith. Recently, brother Psittakos, you explained why the pilgrim Aetheria, the child of our concern, suffers so, and how God engages with her. Can you tell me: where in this woman from Salerno does faith hide itself? I ask because they are about to leave."

Psittakos: "May their faith be like that seed of which the Son of the one true God in Heaven spoke in his parable of the Kingdom of Heaven: 'The Kingdom of Heaven is like a mustard seed that a farmer sowed in his field. Though smaller than all other mustard seeds, it grew tall to become bigger than all other plants in the garden. It grew to a tree so that birds could come down from the sky and dwell in its branches.'"

Ebonius: "It gladdens me to hear this. When I am no more, and if the persecutors seize me, I shall go in peace knowing you are here. When those women leave, will Aetheria, the widow, the child of our concern, be among them?"

Psittakos: "She will stay."

Ebonius: "Is that a good sign, or how do you understand it, my clever brother Psittakos?"

Psittakos: "She told Hortensia my wife she was glad the others are leaving. She wants to be alone. The others never stop talking of that bloody deed. But when they start, she shrinks back and cannot speak. The women despise Aetheria because she'll stay and she let herself be bribed by that man Sebastian with a bolt of silk and some flagons of Greek wine, and sell out her own dead husband."

Ebonius: "I know. That's why I sought this conversation with you."

Psittakos: "Patience, brother Ebonius. Think of the mustard seed."

*

And so they head homeward, those young women. The road leads south, along wide military highways, past soldiers, guardposts, patrols. They make their way through hordes of people of many nationalities. This is great, mighty, terrible Rome.

They sing quietly as they huddle together. They have human bodies. They wear the clothing of their homeland, they sate their hunger with human food, their bread comes out of the earth, fruit from trees.

But there is room in them for more, much more. Where does it grow, this more that is not from wells, from trees, from ears of corn? They are Christians.

Christ died on the Cross. Mary was his Mother.

Aetheria alone in Rome. Now and then, only now and then, she turns up at services, and once, but only once, she took part in Holy Communion.

How those around her suffer.

Always, even when she sits mute, her face is happy. Her voice is still warm and melodious. She will let no one take a peep inside.

*

Such was her situation at the end of her visit to Rome. Ebonius insisted time and again: she is not yet won over, she fell once under a spell, and then fell under the spell of a new miracle – the spell has flown, and she has reverted to the customs of her native place.

But Psittakos the caretaker and his wife Hortensia, who spoke to her every day and kept close watch, dared no verdict. They did a lot of good, and were patient. They prayed for her.

She was like one who sells a big house to a new owner. He grew tired of it, sold it off all contents included. But now the new owner makes an inventory. Every item is examined one by one, turned about, knocked, inspected. The former owner sees pictures and carpets, cupboards and chests, books and bric à brac that he never noticed before. But they were in his possession for decades, were his property. He never made use of them. Now he's to be parted from them. He doesn't like it. Whyever must he give it all up?

Such was the situation with the pilgrim Aetheria, the widow Aetheria. What had she gained, who had protected her from her calamity, what could help her now? Here she was in Rome, all alone, lodging with strangers. She made known her wish to return home. She took cordial leave of her new friends.

A ship was found. Away from Rome, whose streets she had trod so resolutely.

*

But once Ebonius and the community had said prayers for Aetheria following her departure, a jingling could be heard in the air. They heard such distant jingling often. They said so many prayers, and their pleas and laments were strung across the air like a harp – but none knew who played this harp that sounded like whoops of joy.

Ebonius, who could hear this jingling and warbling, thought of King David as he brought the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem: “So David went and brought up the ark of God from the house into the city of David with gladness. And it was so, that when they that bare the ark of the Lord had gone six paces, he sacrificed oxen and fatlings. And David danced before the Lord with all his might; and David was girded with a linen ephod.”

Was it not an angel that jingled and warbled there? Was it not Aetheria’s guardian angel singing out in jubilation? So Ebonius thought.

Oh how moving it was when she was in despair, and wanted God to grant her a murder.

Part 2: Jerusalem

Back home

She went ashore at Naples. Her brother toiled on his plot as if nothing had happened.

With dragging feet to Valerio's grave.

The flowers she carried in both arms she strewed across the mound. She flung herself down on the mound. She begged forgiveness, blamed others, promised not to leave him in limbo. As long as she lived he would not be lost.

"I was at Rome. I've come from Rome. I haven't been back yet to our little hut. This is my first step, Valerio my beloved – to you. Your Aetheria is here. Can you hear me? I'm so close to you, to your beloved face, your beloved lips, beloved hands.

"I was away at Rome. Forgive me. It was our only quarrel, when I went to the Christians and you didn't want to. You were right. Their god has shown me no mercy. They promised so much, I was such a child to believe them. God made me weak. I must save myself from him. I want to know nothing more of him, I no longer know him, believe me, Valerio. Nothing comes between us."

While Aetheria, the young peasant woman, lies on the flower-strewn mound and makes up with her dead husband, a herald from God, a heavenly angel, her guardian angel, stands behind her, and stays silent.

He leans over Aetheria and touches her shoulder.

But angels are God's invisible creatures. They have no need to be burdened with a body.

Unnecessary to describe how light they are, to compare them with a feather, or with air.

Truly, they are weightless.

And because we humans have at our disposal only other humans and images from our experience, we can in no way state what they are like.

But because they *are*, we should strive despite every obstacle to find words in our language for their actions and their comportment, and for images that reflect them.

They appear, it is to us a mood, a vision,

They vanish,

They leave us to ourselves.

A different vision,

A different mood.

We believe

These are ourselves,

Ourselves alone –

But who are we without them?

*

Aetheria, drained, stood at the graveside and dried her eyes. She was comforted. She had a sense of clarity and assurance.

This clarity and assurance were other than what she knew.

Months go by. Years go by

And Aetheria, back from her pilgrimage, lived and toiled alongside her brother on their plot.

Months go by. Years go by.

She grows graver, calmer. Her beauty persists. It becomes a different kind of beauty. Her melodious voice persists. It's another kind of melody.

Like many others in the village, she has a loved one in the cemetery. Her husband. His grave is tended and adorned with flowers.

Once upon a time, up until the death of her husband, the young fisherman Valerio, she was a Christian. Her husband lost his life during one of those bandit raids. The strange thing was, the occasion was a clash between two gangs that normally pursued a common task, but this time found themselves on opposing sides. Valerio and his people realised this only as their raid began, found it intolerable, even unjust. And so he attacked his erstwhile friends, and was killed. The victorious gang did all they could to assuage the grief of Valerio's widow, and the two gangs, who saw the sad outcome as a warning, even made a pact that never again should it be left unclear when a trick was being planned on a travelling convoy. The pact held, in memory of the calamity, and had a wholesome effect.

The widow herself, no longer in distress, soon after she returned from her trip to Rome removed the holy emblem of the Christians, the sign of a fish, from her room and under the eaves of the cottage. Since she could change nothing else, she thought she owed her husband this at least.

At first people made spiteful remarks behind her back when she went off to the cemetery. Then no more.

Months went by. Years went by.

Her beauty lasts, it's a different, more sombre kind of beauty. Her melodious voice lasts, but new notes are present in her voice, though she is unaware of it.

Angels turn up.

Disappear.

They leave us to ourselves.

An altered vision.

An altered mood.

We believe

That it's ourself,

Us alone.

At the place on the wall once occupied by the fish emblem, the sign of Christ the divine Redeemer, who, as was reported, died on the Cross in Palestine – at this spot, greeted and kissed every day by loving glances, is now a little shelf, and on it a clay statuette of her revered

Hestia. To the heathens who rule the Roman Empire she is the goddess of the domestic hearth, daughter of the goddess Rhea Cybele, who is accompanied on her travels through the land by corybants playing horns, cymbals and flutes. She pursues the pretty Phrygian youth Attis with her love. He desired a mortal human maiden – but at the wedding *she* appeared: Cybele. Dread terror fell on all when the great goddess appeared. Attis, the handsome bridegroom, fled maddened, fled into the mountains, and plunged a sword into his breast. Now come laments for abandoned scorned Rhea. And year after year ever since, at the equinoxes, the corybants, Rhea's entourage, come storming across the mountains calling "Attis, Attis!" to find the one who scorned the great goddess' love and was run to ground by the great goddess at his wedding with a mortal maiden. She cast terrible dread over Attis and his companions, and Attis, maddened, took his own life in the mountains. From his blood, violets grew.

Cybele's love brought forth a daughter. This was Hestia. She kept quiet. She desired no man. Gods turned up and tried to woo her. But she – year upon year she shared in her mother's grieving for Attis, the pretty Phrygian youth torn from her. Often while still young she would run with the mad corybants through the mountains, clashing cymbals and crying out Attis, Attis! She hoped to awaken him for her mother.

But he never showed himself.

For ages, violets bloomed from his blood.

Then she knelt before her mother. She held suffering Rhea's hands and begged her to ask the king of the gods, Zeus, to grant her, sad young Hestia, a favour. For she saw what was wrought by love, this terrible love between male and female, whether mortal or divine.

"So what favour, Hestia my dearly beloved, my favourite daughter, am I to ask the king of the gods for you?"

"That he permit me to spend my life far away from men. That he preserve me from the violent pains of love."

"Oh, there is more to love than pain, my beloved daughter."

"I see you, mother, I hold your hands. I know how you suffer. Every year at the equinoxes I would run through the mountains and clash my cymbals; the corybants would play their flutes, clash their cymbals and blow their horns until the forests echoed and birds shrieked and flew away. We never found Attis. We never awakened Attis for you, mother. They whipped arms, breasts, legs with rods, called out Attis, Attis, made their blood flow. Maidens would run with us, they sacrificed their honour for you – and will go on doing so year after year – but they never awakened Attis.

"They cannot, for I see now that this is the law of love.

"And that, mother, is why I beg you to go to Zeus and soften his heart, so that no man may touch me and Apollo and Poseidon may be kept from pestering me."

Rhea Cybele, the great mother, took her daughter onto her lap. Hestia's cheeks were cold, her hands shook. Hestia whispered: "Will you go to him, to Zeus?"

Rhea pleaded: "Grant her this."

Zeus: "You want to kill her?"

Rhea: "I succoured you, Zeus, in the caves of Mount Ida when you were a babe. All the Earth's fecundity, all that comes of animals and plants, is awakened and tended by me. Take it from me, grant me this relief. Free my daughter from the great, violent, terrible law of love."

Zeus pondered. He was not happy with her request. There was strangeness in her tone, as if some danger was announcing itself.

"I will," he said at last, when Rhea already feared the worst. "If she herself wishes to keep love at a distance, she shall watch over the loves of others so that they do not become savage, raving, destructive. I cannot free her from ever observing love. That I will not. Or else it might occur to her to break out of the house of my world. I bind her, chain her to the loves of others. It shall not be your burning love, that follows the dead even unto the Beyond. She shall sit at the hearth, protect the hearth fire, see to the peace of the household. You are my mother, the mother of Zeus, lions draw you on your way, Rhea. She shall be chaste. But she shall sit where women spin, children play."

"To all that you grant, O Zeus, we accede."

The pilgrim Aetheria – Sabine whose husband was taken from her, he whom she loved so boundlessly and no one up till now had been able to place bounds on her love – every day she placed flowers and produce of the field before the little figurine of Hestia the virgin goddess. Having to part from her fellow Christian women, and those women at first scolded and reviled her – that was hard.

But she remained steadfast.

The word Jerusalem

Her brother has married, an infant lies in the cradle. Aetheria watches over the child when the parents go off to the dance.

Once a man from Syracuse passes through the village. He has come from Rome. He is a Christian and has visited pious Ebonius and his flock. Ebonius charged him to convey his blessing to pious sister Aetheria, and when he arrives in Syracuse, if time allows, he should write a letter reporting his safe arrival and how things are with Christians in those southern parts. In particular, Ebonius would like news of that pious sister the pilgrim Aetheria, who some time ago made the pilgrimage to Rome to pray for her unlucky husband before the bones of the holy martyrs, and to soften her own widow's grief.

The man from Syracuse, back in his home town, thanked his good fortune in being able to send the requested letter to venerable Ebonius via an emissary, informing the pastor of the Roman community of his unremarkable, even happy, journey and his arrival home, where he will promptly spread word of the steadfastness of the Roman flock. Even if Caesar Imperator is so mightily enthroned in that wonderful city, and extends and secures his dominion over the whole of the inhabited world, yet he will never succeed in breaking the souls of the pious. And so he, the man from Syracuse, has also met with the community of Portosa near Salerno, on the recommendation of venerable Father Ebonius. He has spoken with each of the women separately, and found in each a true handmaiden of Christ. It did not escape his notice that the people who dwell, farm and fish in their remote village have great need of frequent and sustained instruction, because their menfolk, as Ebonius knows, adhere to the customary

worship of idols, and some even, who were mercenaries in foreign lands, have brought back with them abhorrent cults from Africa and Egypt.

As for the pilgrim Aetheria, to whom Father Ebonius commended his particular attention, he is saddened to conclude this missive by noting that, as far as one can tell from outward appearance – and who can gaze into the heart? – she has fallen away from the holy faith. She no longer takes part in communion. Her friends, the other women of the village, including those who made the pilgrimage with her at the time of her grief, have not managed to draw her back to our faith – so that when I visited her in her cottage I found a heart-wrenching spectacle. In a very visible spot opposite the window is a shelf that she has turned into a shrine. Fresh flowers and fruit were laid out on the shelf, and the little brown figurine at the centre of this token of veneration, gazing down upon it, is the heathen goddess Hestia. Though troubled already, even shocked, at the sight of this idol – I had expected some weakening of faith, but was not prepared for this – something else troubled me even more. It was the sight of the woman Aetheria herself in this cottage, this little room, before the decked-out shrine to the goddess Hestia. For it will not be news to you, venerable Father Ebonius, that she is regarded as the goddess of the domestic hearth. And there she stood, Aetheria, alone in the room, and decked out the little shrine to this goddess – she who was granted no child during her marriage, and her husband now gone. I thought: why does she cling so fast to this? With us in our faith she would have found consolation and support. I dared not question her. She is a sturdy young woman of a special and delicate beauty; the Lord has protected her, living alone as she does, by not letting her come to Syracuse, where she would be exposed to ruination. Father Ebonius, she sat there friendly enough, but unapproachable. It pains me to relate that even the greetings you and brother Psittakos and his family sent were acknowledged by no more than a nod. I could not bring myself to say much to her, maybe I was too weak. I felt like a hawker offering some unappealing item. What a loss to us, Father Ebonius. For she is clever and energetic and enjoys respect in the village, even among the men.

“Ghosts,” Aetheria whispered to herself after showing the guest to the door. Nothing stirred in her. Again she took refuge in virginal Hestia, all-knowing goddess, the only one with whom she could achieve understanding.

*

The man from Syracuse was but the forerunner of many others who at that time made their way from northern Italy and Rome down to the south. For the first time the people of Salerno learned that dangers were abroad in the world. Barbarian hordes were said to have moved close to the imperial frontier in the north. Bands had already been spotted on the Po plain. And even if such reports could not be verified, they could see with their own eyes many vessels heading south, filled with rich people fleeing Rome, seeking safety in Sicily and Africa.

And in truth, there came a few weeks later a mass flight of families from Rome down to the south. At first those meridional landscapes profited: the refugees were provided with temporary lodging, and food. But the strangers said things, people questioned them, and now the countryfolk grew uneasy. Where are these barbarians? What direction are they heading in? How big are their armies?

Then imperial troops came riding through the villages, calling to all veterans and fit men, recruiting and pressing. They distributed weapons to those who stayed behind with their fields, and formed squads who were to organise defences. Even women were not disdained, for

among the barbarians women too were fighters. Of course strong resolute Aetheria took up arms and joined in the exercises and wargames supervised by veterans and legionaries.

The stream of refugees heading south swelled to a flood. Dreadful reports were whispered in the village. The Emperor's rage against Christians had redoubled. He blamed Christians for undermining the defensive capability of certain legions. Here and there he had mass executions carried out, whereupon the numbers of Christians among the refugees grew. Aetheria guided and cared for many of these. She did her duty without emotion. She asked after Ebonius, that venerable man, and Psittakos and his family, and how the community in Rome was holding up. The leaders were known to be in hiding, they would not be found inside the city. Now Aetheria was alert. If even Ebonius is on the run, if she might meet him and Psittakos and Hortensia right here ... She kept her ears open.

Such laments from the refugees, men, women, children. Day and night. Mothers who had lost children, children wailing for parents, grieving women all on their own. Help was needed day and night.

The word "Jerusalem". Many thought to seek safety over in Greece. Many knew only the one word: "Jerusalem".

Aetheria pricked up her ears. The word intrigued and nagged at her. One night it was whispered in her ear. She sat up, stared about her into the darkness, paced about the room. No one was there. Her heart thumped.

The next night someone again threw this word her way. She kept to her bed. She pulled the blanket over her face. So someone says this word: what does it have to do with her?

But the following night she woke up to a dreadful shriek. She was about to leap from the bed and throw on her cloak to see what was happening out in the road. But all was silent. She sat on the bed and waited. No sound came. She lay down. But the moment she stretched out, the shriek came again. At once she was on her feet, grabbed her cloak. Now she could make out words amid the din, a clear voice shouting: "Come, you wicked disobedient woman! How long must I take care of you? What are you up to?"

Who was speaking? Who was being scolded?

She went to the door, opened, listened. Complete silence. Perplexed she closed the door. It was pitch dark, the night not yet half over. She would slip quietly back to bed. She felt her way along the wall. Then again the shouting, very close, obviously there in the room:

"Now I have you. So you think your clay idol will protect you from me. Your idol won't help, you wicked stubborn woman! Will you understand at last? Must I come with thunder and lightning to open your ears, Aetheria, you dragon in its lair?"

In the morning she did her usual chores. More refugees had arrived. These were Christians, terrified of Diocletian.

*

She understood when she regarded the little brown figurine of Hestia in her room. She wept before the figurine: "I'm going to Jerusalem, Hestia. I have to go."

The figurine said nothing.

Aetheria: "I must, Hestia, I must. Let me go. Forgive me. Barbarians are coming. Who knows what will happen to us." When the figurine made no reply, Aetheria sank to her knees and lifted her arms: "I do not wish to offend you. But I cannot stay. I cannot care for you and set flowers before you. Oh how it pains me to leave you, Hestia sweet sister."

She could not stay. All at once everything had changed. Like a vessel that has lost its anchor and is adrift in a storm, she was swept onward.

"Why leave?" her brother asked. "You're strong, you have weapons, you should help us."

"I cannot."

"This is our land. This is the Roman Empire, and we are Romans."

"I know." Nothing more, apart from tears.

"So where will you go?" asked young Julia, her brother's wife. "Are you scared? I'm staying."

But Aetheria would not name her destination. She was unwilling to say the word that pursued her day and night, the word she could not deny, but had to throw herself into its arms. She was like a ship that has lost its anchor and whirls madly before the storm, lofted by waves up into the clouds and then plunging to the depths of the sea, drenched in foam and water.

Big, strong, grave, her guardian angel stood at her side. He went ahead, stepped calmly along, and she could not pass him by.

"What's up, dear seedling," he said one evening to Aetheria; the angry departure now long behind her, and the village and the cemetery, Valerio and Hestia. "Why did you rend your garments when you stepped for the last time across the threshold of your home? You shall not see it again for a long while. But it is your will, and they all begged you to stay. They urged you, warned you. Why, before you crossed the threshold of your home for the last time, did you take the clay figurine in your arms like an infant, and press the image to your cheek and kiss it and let hot tears fall upon it?"

"Why shouldn't I weep when I must leave my Hestia, my sweet silent sister, all forlorn?"

"Why, my sweet seedling, did you stand so long that morning silently by the grave of your husband, and you smiled into the air and you bowed twice, three times, and never glanced down at the grave and you whispered: I'm here, Valerio, I'm here now, come, make yourself ready for the journey."

"You call me sweet seedling. Why do you call me this?"

"You know." – "Tell me."

"See how a seedling emerges from the seed. When a seed is laid in the earth, it swells in the dampness and the green shoot makes its appearance. As the green shoot pushes up it forms a stem and little leaves. As the stem rises, the leaves unfurl. Leaf after leaf emerges from the stem and unfurls. But when the time comes, on the plant, on the stem, between the leaves, at the tip, little buds appear that open and reveal their colours."

"I'm not a seedling. I have no roots. I have feet to stand on and legs for walking. I can't bring forth leaves and buds."

"Aetheria, dear seedling, yesterday you were a shoot, today you are a stem with little leaves, tomorrow the stem shall climb yet higher, leaves shall unfurl, and buds shall come forth. Then

flowers with their colour and their scent. All in due sequence. You have everything within you. You shall bring it all to the light of day. Do not resist. Do not balk. You are not a seedling to remain always a seedling. You should not remain always a root. You won't even remain a flower for ever. Oh the mystery of unfolding. Like one stepping out of a bath, or a swimmer from the river. First only the head with its face and breathing lips. Then the dripping throat and shoulders and arms come up out of the water. The arms keep rowing. Then chest, torso, body; the feet are still on the riverbed, the legs bear the body, droplets trickle down the ruddy skin. But the swimmer does not rest. The bathe has refreshed him. He climbs from the bath."

"What is all this? What are you trying to say?"

"One thing must follow after another. Aetheria, you cannot wrest yourself from my angel. You do not frighten me when you wipe away the emblem of truth in your little house and place a clay idol on your shelf. The clay idol does not frighten me."

A wave of grief swept over her as the angel neared. She implored: "Speak clearly."

"You think you must do battle with me. You want to, but I do not yield. I cannot. I have been sent by one higher. The Highest sent me."

"I'm only a poor human. What do you want with me?"

"You do not know the meaning of human. The Highest was once human. Mary was human."

"Oh, let me on my way. I want to go to Jerusalem, with the pilgrims."

"Will you kill again this time? Who will you kill?"

"Who do you speak of?"

The conversation was at an end. He faded into the wall niche. His voice again: "What does Aetheria want?"

"To go to Jerusalem. I want to go – to our great Mother. She sweeps across the mountains. She drives a lion chariot. They dance behind her and rattle their castanets and cry their yearning cry Attis, Attis, the lovely youth has sunk into the earth. Where is Attis?"

"That is why you're going to Jerusalem? That is why Aetheria is a pilgrim? To call to Attis?"

*

She went ahead of them all with her tall staff, the pilgrim Aetheria. She carried her head high. The angel held her in his embrace.

She was full of energy, calm and sure. They listened to her. She swam in the stream of refugees, the frightened. She wasn't fleeing. She wasn't afraid.

Until Brindisi they all held together. At the harbour the stream split. Some took ship for Greece, others would go on to Syria, the Holy Land.

And there at the harbour, as she went at the head of the pilgrim men and women to guide them to their ship, the angel let go of her. He strolled at her side like a harbour worker carrying baggage, and addressed her merrily: "Good for you, maiden Aetheria, helping them all. Truly, when anyone sees this they know that no barbarian can do you harm. You might do well to stay here. You'd soon find yourself a husband of your own kind."

"I am no maiden, I am a widow."

“Then one must lament for the husband who had to leave behind such a strong pretty wife. You’re going overseas, you’ll pray for sure over there, when you can no longer bear your grief.”

She thought for a moment: “It is not grief that drives me on.”

“And you have no fear of the Vandals?” – “I have no fear.”

“Then you adhere so strongly to the Christian faith that you leave everything lying here and must head over there and plan to serve your God and plan to live a poor chaste life.”

“Who are you? What brings you to question me like this?”

So he stroked her head most tenderly, and laughed: “So you won’t even answer. Farewell, Aetheria, widow who is no widow, pilgrim who makes no pilgrimage. Bon voyage!”

He vanished into the throng.

*

On board she sat by the mast, big strong woman, sheepskin across her knees. Head and face were protected from the sun by a bright colourful cloth. A small bag with bread and fruit lay at her feet. There was much lamenting on the vessel. She listened, as she had back home. She went about, consoled, and shared what she had and what others gave her.

The Greeks and those heading for Greece or the islands were soon more cheerful. They saw the coast of their land and it seemed to them like Paradise. They sang. There on deck young couples twirled and danced. Others were touched to the heart when they saw the happy land of Greece, and could not sing. Ah, where was their own land? Many were charmed, chatted with this person or that, and went ashore at some spot where the vessel called in. They gathered bags and chests, took children into their arms or by the hand, and made their cautious way down the ladder to the rowboat below. And see: they’ve left the vessel behind. See: Italy, Rome, the village, barbarians – now all lies behind them.

The others watched from above. They waved, waved back and forth. We’re travelling on, many hours still to go, days even. We are pilgrims. We’re headed for the Holy Land.

They were a very cohesive group on the big ship. Now no more shouting children, women running back and forth. The sick and the frail lay under sunshades, they are making this journey for themselves. Some are returning home after a misfortune, and hope to bring back a blessing. Some have been affected by the general fear. And once some stood at the railings and prayed, gazed with longing to south and east.

They sailed past Crete.

The woman was filled with such fervour.

Here is the sea on which the Apostle Paul, the holy man, voyaged after the Saviour appeared to him on the road to Damascus, in a flash of light: “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” Saul fell dazzled to the ground. His sight returned in Damascus. Paul gazed upon these waters, this wind heard the words he spoke to his shipmates, this sun on high saw how he exhorted and comforted his fellow voyagers.

The ship swooped and veered like a bird sipping water. Wind blew and the ship flew blithely before it like wave-foam. It skimmed wavecrests like a dancer who touches the floor only on tiptoe. The waves played with the ship! They knew these voyagers, were well disposed.

These were not the Nereids spoken of by idolaters – sisters and daughters of a sea-god brandishing the triton with which he made Earth tremble. Thetis too, mother of the hero Achilles, belonged to him.

But these were creatures of God the heavenly Father, who on the second day made the firmament, and divided the waters which were under the firmament from the waters which were above the firmament. On the fourth day he commanded: Let the waters bring forth abundantly the moving creature that has life, and he created great whales, and every living creature that moves, which the waters brought forth abundantly, after their kind.

And so all of these, waves and fishes, were creatures of the one heavenly Creator and knew each other, whatever road they were on.

And how could they know nothing more and nothing other of the ship than its weight, its timbers, its helm, its rudder, its sails masts and ropes, and the heavy anchor now stowed high?

How could the dainty, limber, flickering, foaming, yielding, questing sea not know about people, about people whose yearning, hoping, grieving, pleading, wishing enveloped the ship like a cloud, like the warm steam given off by a trotting horse in frosty weather.

Now on the ship there was no more lamenting about flight and expulsion, on deck or down below, only eyes directed south and east, whither they were gliding as if drawn by a magnet. Towards that enormous flower, that bloom whose scent wafted to them across the water.

Aetheria was a voyager on this vessel. We know what she has been through.

I guarded you like the apple of my eye. You were torn away from me. You were the sweetest secret of my heart, of my very “I”. Then someone came whom I did not know, did not want to know, and knocked at my door, so that my heart trembled and opened and at last broke and spilled all that it contained. And here I float like a plank on water, bobbing on the waves.

All that is past, Aetheria. In the meantime you have been to Rome, and yet they could not help you. If they had helped you to avenge your husband, to cut Sebastian down so that he lay there in his blood, as ashen as Valerio was when they brought him to you – all would be different. But it was not to be.

And that is why I choose to float on the water like a plank after shipwreck and bob up and down with the waves, and I’m glad when a wave lifts me and the fish open their mouths and ask: what is that, what is that, what kind of creatures are they that cannot swim, that have no fins, they place a plank in the water between them and us, what manner of life do they live?

And now the wave rears up, bends its back and crashes down on us, marvelling, spraying water and telling the others all sorts of things.

What can such a wave think of people, of me, pilgrim Aetheria who was once a Christian, and what is yet to happen to me? If only it could tell. The man at the harbour could not.

Heavenly sky, heavenly sea, heavenly light. And me in between.

Is it all just luck?

Not Rome, not Salerno – only luck?

Not Jerusalem – only luck?

Jerusalem – heavenly sky, heavenly embrace, no talking, no parting.

Now you are here, Valerio. Now I have you, here on the sea. It's your sea too. To think I find you here. Greetings, Valerio. All – luck.

I could lie like this forever, just swimming. As far as I'm concerned, the ship need never arrive. To be a dolphin, chase about with it, with our great Mother, with her through the forests, up and down the mountains. Mighty is our great Mother. They seek Attis, Attis.

And this is Cyprus. Not much longer now.

And the dark line over there, it's Asia Minor, and Jerusalem is over that way.

She sank to the deck. They all knelt. Bent the neck. To think they dare approach Jerusalem. Sails billowed, stiffened. Unstoppable, as if under its own power, the ship strained eastward.

Land came to meet it. Mountains. A wide anchorage opened out at the foot of a mountain. This is Haifa.

The voyage is over.

*

Women rode on mules, modest, eager, silent, others rode in little carts, other prayed aloud, and now and then exchanged words. They praised God and glorified the Virgin Mary, who bore the holy child.

Aetheria went among them. The voyage had been lovely, full of promise. As dark and filled with grief as the trip to Rome had been – oh Ebonius, Psittakos, oh oh Sebastian and the rest – just so was this voyage filled with light. That is why the cry had gone up: Jerusalem.

And maybe the one who drew her onward now was the same one who spoke to her back there – her confidant, the one who knew her best of all, in whom she could confide all that oppressed her, and who knew even more of her than she knew herself, who sometimes threatened her and adopted the discourse of a learned man. Oh what does he want from me, sometimes he frightens me. Of course he is one of those who fly between heaven and earth and take hold of people, or sometimes tempt and ruin them.

Aetheria could feel him up ahead of their little procession. Now and then this or that man must be him, she thought, one who turns around and looks at her, stands by the wayside and gazes after the train, and follows at a distance.

Palms of Tiberias. The Sea of Gennesaret. All night the young men fished in vain, but as dawn greyed an unknown figure called across from the shore: "Children, have you nothing to eat?" It was the Risen Man.

The Jordan valley. Black felt tents of Bedouin. Men ploughing, the women stand outside the tents with children, call and sing. They bake bread.

Silwan in the Kidron valley. And there is Jerusalem, lofty city.

It was destroyed by Titus and Vespasian. Rubble lies many yards thick.

Oh God, heathens have fallen upon your heritage. They have despoiled your temple and of Jerusalem have made heaps of stones. They have exposed the corpses of your servants in the open air to be devoured by birds, and the flesh of your saints by beasts of the countryside. They have spilled blood over Jerusalem like water, and there were none to dig graves.

This was the royal palace built by Herod. Here Pilate interrogated the Lord.

King Solomon built himself a palace, it stood on Mount Ophel.

The pilgrim women looked for the temple to which Mary brought the Christ Child. It once stood here. A heathen forecourt surrounded it. The Hall of Kings had four naves. They were roofed with cedar. Pillars stretched away in four rows. In the west a remnant of the exterior wall: the Wailing Wall.

Blocks of stone a yard thick, dense scrub between. There an ancient tottering tower; it flanks the palace built by King Herod.

Pilgrim men and women wander about, trailing behind pious men who have taken up residence on these heights. They pray with them in wretched little huts and chapels, in open air. For here, among Bedouin, Syrians and Egyptians and pilgrims from all four corners of the world, imperial decrees have no force.

*

Aetheria had sailed blithely over the sea. Here she applied herself again to being helpful, as if she were back home and not herself a pilgrim. She supported the frail, and led them to the chapel of pious Eusebius. In order not to give herself away, she had to join in their prayers whether she wanted to or no. Although she followed the service distracted and without emotion, she was soon carried along on the rapture, mightily, against her resolve to stand fast and merely keep an eye on the women she had led here. And now here she lies and carries others with her, praying and babbling in ecstasy.

Eusebius, the Father Superior, hated such behaviour. He spoke to Aetheria before they left, not in a friendly tone; interrogated her. She was ashamed and angry with herself. The mysterious man must have done this to her. He would not leave her alone. She swore to herself that next time she had to step into a chapel she would think of Hestia and pray to Great Mother Rhea. Oh yes, she'll call on her protectors, for she is no Christian.

I should never have come here, she wailed. If only he would show himself again, that weird fellow who claims to know all about me and advised me to come to Jerusalem, even though he knows I carry within me a secret grief for Valerio.

Was it really to help me that I was enticed here? I shall not let myself be tricked.

*

And then they were taken off to see Bethlehem, and all were eager and joyful to make the trek to where the Christ Child had lain in the manger, where the Saviour came into our terrible world. Aetheria went along. She had to join in their devotions. She was filled with resolve. She called to Great Mother Rhea – and lo! she came happily through every test.

But then on the last day it hit her. And how the blow landed, this time! It came at the final prayer service, which she attended, her resolve firm as ever. After a short while she began to whisper, and her gaze was transfigured. Later, others mentioned it. They were happy for her, jealous. But the second time was worse, and of more consequence.

In ancient times, as everyone recalled, three kings came out of the Orient towards Bethlehem, to greet the King of Kings when none but His mother yet knew Him. They brought gifts, the first reverential gifts of this mundane world which owes to Him its very existence.

They brought gold, myrrh and frankincense, and had ridden far and had often to ask the way. But a little star in the sky came to their aid. It floated ahead and they followed until they came to the grotto where the Holy Mother of God lay with the Child. The star came to a stop above the grotto. Oh what ages have passed since the Magi journeyed to Bethlehem and revered the Child in its crib.

The Child grew up, became Jesus of Nazareth; he wandered through the land preaching, performing miracles, and in his thirty-third year was brought before the Romans in the high city of Jerusalem, on the hill of Golgotha, and there was crucified between two thieves as he had prophesied; and he also foresaw and prophesied that on the third day he would rise again. His grave was found empty. He had ascended to Heaven to sit at the right hand of his Father.

*

There is at Bethlehem a big cistern, or well, known even to the ancients. And when Jesus vanished from the Earth to be lifted up into Heaven, the little star did not follow him. It had fulfilled its task here below by leading the three kings to their proper destination. But it was not as other stars. When could just any star be assigned such a task? There they stand every night, a countless host as anyone can see, wheeling imperceptibly and silent as sheep in the blue meadow prepared for them. Slowly, regularly, the multitudes coalesce and diverge according to the season.

But that little star was chosen one day by God the Father and summoned to quit its silent assigned spot in order to undertake a great mission in the scheme of salvation on which the Son of God had now embarked. The name of this star is lost to history. We know it only as the star which guided the three kings out of the Orient, which they followed when they set off until they could ask: "Where is the newborn King of the Jews? We saw his star back there in the east, and have come to revere him."

The star proceeded steady as a guide dog ahead of the three kings. It lighted up their long weary way.

But clever and obedient as the little star was, the three kings that it guided were not. They were meant only to follow and kneel down and revere, so that the day of the Lord's birth might be known not to the angels in Heaven alone, to be celebrated only by the heavenly host – oh with what bliss did angels announce to shepherds in their fields that night, that unremarked but greatest of all nights: "I bring you tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people, for unto you is born this day a Saviour." And the heavenly host sang in praise of God and promised peace upon the Earth to all people of good will. And what fear and sorrow sounded in the angels' singing, for they knew who lay in this crib and what path he would follow among humans all the way to Golgotha, to that moment when his head would droop and he would breathe: "It is finished."

And so that this night of all nights would be celebrated not just by angels and not just by shepherds in their field, but by people all over the world – that is why the three wise men appeared out of the east. But they babbled the secret, so that King Herod learned of it and issued an edict that all children up to the age of two years should be murdered. But Mary and Joseph and the divine Child assigned to their care were able to flee.

The humble little star that had fulfilled its mission was not recalled by the Ruler of Heaven to its former place in the great blue firmament. And the star itself had no desire to quit

Bethlehem, having heard and seen so much. The little star desired to remain. And the Lord granted its plea.

And so the star sank itself down into the well at Bethlehem, where it often glimpsed Mary when she came to scoop water. There deep down in the cistern the humble pious star hid away in its hermit cell, and no one could see it in the deep dark basin. Apart from a select few, apart from those on whom God's glance lay.

This was well known in Bethlehem and across the entire Holy Land. And when the pilgrims reached Bethlehem they too were led to the well, and almost everyone gazed down. So that the sun's reflection on the water would not dazzle them, most were provided with a linen cloth to cover the head. They gazed down, but aeons had passed since the humble little star, a monk hiding in his cell, had last revealed itself.

Now the company of refugees that we followed across the sea is in Bethlehem, at the well's rim. Shy, hearts thumping, each of these children of humankind covers the head, one after the other they accept the linen cloth, and scan the depths. Each is allowed a little time to gaze and seek. Then they straighten up, return the linen cloth, and blink and smile, sheepish and sad. No, I saw nothing. The others smile too. Basically it is just a game.

Now the pilgrim Aetheria is here. It is her turn. She is the last to stand at the rim, she has hung back, reluctant to join in. On the other hand she wants to avoid suspicion among the people she is travelling with, and avoid revealing what she thinks of all the prayers and pious revering. She has seen behind the curtain, she has the benefit of some experience already.

People ribbed her when she would not step forward. Did she think she was somehow special? No, here everyone must show her colours. It's a kind of confession, nothing like it in the whole world. Only the totally innocent and pure of heart can see the star. They laughed: Aetheria's embarrassed! She grew angry. The thought of joining in the game revolted her.

But there was nothing for it. She took the cloth and bent over the rim. She bent so low that they laughed and called out: "Careful! Don't fall in!" She was furious, grim, they could not see her screwed-up face. She had a secret desire to tear a scrap off the cloth and throw down a curse. She pressed her breast harder against the rim.

Then they saw both arms stretch across the abyss, and remain rigid.

They heard her groan, sigh, utter little cries. Everyone kept quiet.

Again she cried out, again, little yelps of joy, a jubilation.

They ran to help her. She lay silent on her breast across the cistern's rim, her head dangled, her arms fell slack beneath her. They pulled her up, shook her. She turned her head aside, her eyes opened, but she closed them at once. She let them stand her up and lead her to a bench.

Some ran back to the well and looked down to see what was there. But there was nothing, just as before.

They crowded around Aetheria. She sat limp on the bench, and spoke in a monotone. Every phrase had to be torn from her.

Yes, there was a gleam, a pale gleam down there. It was light, it rose out of the water and sparkled. It moved from side to side. It gleamed, there was humming, or singing, very delicate, very soft.

Nothing more could be got from her. Once she had let this out, suddenly her face assumed its old healthy natural hue. She stood unaided, held the linen cloth to her face, and wept aloud.

Pilgrim men and women knelt and prayed.

*

Rumours of what happened at the well in Bethlehem spread rapidly across the land. People came from every direction to find out more, and to see Aetheria. Oh, poor defeated Aetheria. For days she could not stop sobbing. They saw her tears flow, they saw her red swollen face, and knew: something shattering has occurred. But those who harboured this thought and wept along with her and prayed at her side and penitently beat their breast did not know Aetheria, beaten, upended, despairing Aetheria, stubborn creature, this lovely pilgrim, who tore herself to bits and never found peace. Oh that she had ever come over the sea. They meant to humble her. Oh that she had ever been lured here to Jerusalem.

Pausanias

In conversation with Pausanias, a Greek whose mother was among the refugees from Italy and was now reunited with him, Aetheria later spoke a little of the events at Bethlehem.

This educated Greek, a man of the world, came into contact with Aetheria soon after she returned from Bethlehem, near Jerusalem, just at the time of growing tension between her and Eusebius, that fanatical doctrinaire man. Pausanias consoled her: "Now it's behind you, Aetheria. You haven't yet burned all your bridges to these other pilgrims, but I'm satisfied with you. Your effect now is like that of a lovely temple with marble columns and cheerful halls, through which crows fly emitting their squawks. We'll soon send them packing."

"Pausanias, you know how grateful I am. But don't talk about your temples."

"You don't like to hear it, my fair Aetheria. But the temples stand, and many of your priests feel so drawn to them that rather than creep into a secret room to worship your god and theirs, they would prefer to climb those marble steps to the pillared halls, even if half the pillars have tumbled, and in a side-hall they call to their god along with their flock – while in a corner buried under rubble the old god still lies on his face and listens astonished to the words of the priest, and to what today's faithful sing."

"Say what you like, Pausanias. You're clever, and halfway a fool. But you natter so sweetly."

"My mother told me, Aetheria, that all the way from Italy across to Crete and on past Cyprus, you were the leader of the refugees and pilgrims. I can well imagine it as you stand here before me with the strong arms of a rower, the penetrating gaze of a shepherdess, and the chaste gravity of an Artemis. But one thing my mother was unable to explain: how it was you came to be among the refugees, and what you sought in their midst. Can you tell me?"

She kept silent.

Pausanias: "You've told me about your home, about Salerno. I've heard from others that you went once to Rome. Now tell me, proud Aetheria, who permits me to call her my friend – and maybe I shall experience that blessed moment when those silent lips call me her friend – what does the man who guides you all, Eusebius, hold against you? I have a suspicion."

“What do you suspect?”

“That – but I don’t want to make you cross – that you are too lovely for him. He knows no other way to approach you but by scolding and cursing. Why do you look at me like that? It’s just how a simple child of the world sees it.”

“Oh Pausanias, enough of such talk.”

“Why should I not be jocular, my fair Roman empress? How else should I succeed in removing the mask from your face? I see you segregated from the pilgrims, you wrestle with the lion Eusebius. It’s all so enwebbed in mysteries that you can’t help but acknowledge my curiosity. Of all things in the world, what tempest swept away a being such as you, and cast her down among these wretched snivelling pilgrims?”

Aetheria replied: “You see how they want nothing to do with me.”

“Actually, you want nothing to do with them.”

Aetheria: “Maybe. And I hope it becomes ever more obvious, so I can draw a clear line between them and me. I’ve never confided why I came over with them. I didn’t want to stay back there. Something drove me across the sea. And at first, when we set out, it was wonderful. For years I’d never been so happy as on this voyage. I was never frightened of the barbarians. I already bore arms, like my brother.”

“So why did you come over here, to my joy? Just for the voyage?”

Aetheria: “Now I want to go away again. I know all I wanted to know. I’ve seen everything. There are no more novelties to show me. I want to leave.”

“Where to?”

“I’ve been drawn into a trap. Treated so maliciously. They haven’t been frank with me.”

“Who?”

Aetheria: “I didn’t want to go to the well. I only went so as not to stand out. They already looked at me askance, because I don’t come to their prayer meetings. So I kept aloof and then they pestered me and took me by the hand, and then ...”

Pausanias: “And then?”

Aetheria gnawed her finger: “I was stupid enough to tell them. But only some of it. I should have behaved like those others who said nothing. All I needed to say was that I’d seen nothing.” Tears stood in her eyes. “But I did see. I, I alone.”

Pausanias: “Don’t cry, lovely Aetheria, my Italian goddess, don’t cry. Tell me, you can tell me: what did you see? You alone? And why didn’t the others? Or did they keep silent because it was too brazen?”

Aetheria, tears still in her eyes, but her face was transfigured, she was changing before his eyes, he had never seen her like this: “They placed a linen cloth on my head, and I looked into the well, down to the bottom where the spring gushes. I didn’t want to tell them anything, and I’m glad I revealed so little; it’s just between me and the star. But I’ll tell it to you, Pausanias, because you mean me well, and I know your mother, and I’ve seen what joy she has in you.”

How lightly she speaks now, all of a sudden, how it does her good to speak.

“Down below, Pausanias, at first it was quite black, and I had no idea why I should be as childish as the others and lie across the cistern’s rim and have a cloth on my head and stare down. What was supposed to be down there at the bottom? The walls of the well, and below them the water. And then, as I lay there thinking how childish it was to lie there on the rim in front of everyone, staring into the depths ... down there a light gleamed. And such a sweet feeling came over me. Then it began to shimmer. The light grew stronger. I turned my head aside, thinking the gleam was coming from above, but higher up everything was as before. Black. Only right at the bottom where the spring gushed, down there it was light, and there was this shimmer and a gleam and it spread so wonderfully, so indescribably clear through the water and onto the walls, a beam, a radiant beam, and then climbing out of the water ...”

Pausanias: “What?”

Aetheria, transformed, enraptured: “Such a comforting, warm, lovely little light. It was the little star. It rose to the surface. The light clung to the surface and then the little star lifted itself like a butterfly from the water and glided to the wall. And there it began to spin and circle round and round.”

Pausanias: “You saw this?”

Aetheria: “And as it circled and I looked across – oh, I couldn’t look away, I could have kept looking to the end of my days, and I heard a humming and chirping and singing, it rose and fell in time with its fluttering and circling, and gradually I made out some words. At first they seemed a foreign language, just at the beginning: words like *modeste, modeste, venite, anapaeste*. It must have been Greek, or Syriac. And then a few words in between that I could make out. The star tried this way, then that way. It changed the language until it found one I could understand. And then it sang out and greeted me and ...” Aetheria sobbed aloud, clapped hands to her face: “It knew my name.”

Pausanias reached for her hand, but she moved away: “Who said this to you?”

“Pausanias, listen to everything it said to me. I’ve not been able to tell anyone. It greeted me and spoke to me and was glad I’d come to the well and hadn’t stayed at home. I felt such bliss, such ineffable bliss, that I could speak back to it and didn’t even know its name and just said ‘Little Star’, and it seemed to me like a little child.

And I lifted up my voice, and spoke to the star:

It was only just now you caught my eye,
But half an eternity could have gone by.
And though I pondered from dawn till late,
I could not pin down
when it was that I never knew you,
and when it was I did not yearn for you,
not just yearn, no, carry you within me,
and now I see you face to face,
and can say it to you.
So now tell me, little star,
who you are,
and why you, so lovely, good and sweet,
do penance in this dark well, down so deep,

why you dwell in that abyssal lair,
and yet still your blissful glow can light our air.

And now the star began to hover, circle round,
as if trapped in water, bobbing up and down,
and for ages made no sound.

Then I heard: Aetheria, Aetheria, pilgrim child,
Greetings to you, pilgrim child Aetheria.

I am the star that long ago
came to this place from Orient lands.
Once I rode proud in the canopy of Heaven,
and spoke with the stars of this and that.
And then, and then,
we felt a mighty Sorrow enter in,
which said: God plans to part from us, and go
down to humans on the Earth below.
He must go down for their salvation.

In my terror that I was losing God,
and would become mortal – one day dead,
I cried out, begged: Take me along!
Don't leave me here with these great Suns!
Take me along to those poor humans.
I'll light your way through storm and calm
and keep you safe from harm.

The angels and the bigger stars all jeered.
But God had other plans, as soon appeared.
He beckoned to me, and explained:
My son – Jesus is his name – will go
down to the Earth, and show
himself to those poor humans,
so mired in sin they are past saving.
But he shall try to save them.

A Virgin is the chosen one,
From her womb shall Jesus soon be born
in accordance with His Divine Will.
And once the Child is born,
the people shall not know of it for years.
But some shall find it out.
So you, little star, must go, make haste,
down there, to pious people in the East.
Show them a sign, lead them on
out of their Oriental land,
over river, lake and mountain pass,
until they come to Bethlehem at last.
There at a shed, a lowly cattle stall,

down on their knees they'll fall,
for my only Son lies there, his cradle a manger,
and Mary rocks Him, keeps Him from danger,
and He feeds,
and she sings Him to a sweet slumber.

Aetheria, in bliss down to Earth I swept,
just as I was: small, frail, the butt of scorn,
but I paid no heed to mockery that morn,
or what the big stars might have thought,
because my task was of such great import:
to guide three Moors from eastern lands
over rivers, lakes and desert sands,
while those big things would not lift a finger.
This I did with unbounded joy.

And later, Aetheria, once it was done,
I lingered a while above that lowly shed,
from which the three kings had long since departed,
and was so blissfully glad to think
of the Jesus Child down there below
that all desire had drained from me
to return to my place above the air,
to Scorpio, to the Great Bear,
among all those strapping great suns
where my time until then had run.
So I stayed, I abided,
and the Lord decided
To let me stay.

And I, I lowered myself into the well.
Mary fetched water.
I feasted on her face
that had nothing in common with that starry race.
And when she vanished, and all came to pass as is known
– the Son of God already flown
to Heaven – I resolved
to keep watch on the place that saw his birth.
For this place is like no other on the Earth.

Aetheria, Aetheria, pilgrim child,
I am the star that long ago
came here from Orient lands
to show the way to those three kings.
All is fulfilled, humanity is saved,
the angels sing Hallelujah,
Christ the Son of God was here.

Now come to Him and offer paeans
for all with which He has blessed those humans.
Hold firm, thou human who hears this word,
hold firm to that great gift from the Lord thy God.

Oh measureless joy,
Oh delight and bliss,
an end to all your sufferings.
So be no more pilgrim, journey no more,
now you have at last arrived.
Aetheria, sister, you are at your goal.
Oh my sister, accept my greeting!
Aetheria, Aetheria, accept my greeting!

*

He listened attentively, his gaze fixed on her all the while. This transformed creature – she's enchanted. A female, lovely woman – who is she?

And what had happened to him?

He shook himself, and averted his gaze.

Now at least I have learned what Christianity is good for. I don't believe any other religion can make such delightful women.

He came closer, and said with a smile: "That was a wonderfully poetic dream, Aetheria, and you remembered it so well. One could believe it lasted a whole night."

She rubbed her arms.

Pausanias: "But at bottom it's all quite harmless, and shouldn't upset you. The little star spoke very amiably, and expressly to you alone. What is there to complain about? It's my belief the others were envious because they saw no light. And if they had seen it, what sort of conversation might it have had with them?"

She kept quite silent. She was still under the spell.

"Fair Aetheria, still in your dream? I shall grow jealous of this star."

At last she gave a sob, lifted her face and looked at him – recognition came at last. And now she searched his face, her brow furrowed, and when she spoke her tone was uncertain.

He: "Still in your dream, lovely Aetheria?"

She, whispering: "What have I said? Was I talking?"

"You spoke of the little star in the well."

Unthinking, she sighed: "My little star."

But already she had turned away. Unhappily she composed her features, uttered a high-pitched wail and rubbed her hands: "But I don't want this. I never wanted it. Is it never to be enough? What am I to do?"

He laid a hand on her arm. She was trembling from head to toe.

"They made me to come to the well. The star spoke to me, why did the star speak to me? For I am no Christian." She stammered: "What do they want from me?"

She clung to him: "Oh, Pausanias, I am so afraid. They won't let go of me."

"But Aetheria, it was only a dream."

"It spoke to me, it knew my name."

"A dream, Aetheria."

She wrung her hands. "What am I to do? Who sent me this? Was it the Devil?"

Now he saw that caution was needed. She was childlike, a peasant woman.

"Tell me, Pausanias. You know so much. Where did the Christian god come from? Whose son was he? Who cared for him, as our great Mother cared for Zeus?"

He laughed: "Who can find their way among all those gods? Leave them to their own devices. Let's stick with ours. Stay with me, do."

She wailed: "If only I'd never gone to Bethlehem. Oh I know, it was him, him."

"Who?"

"Someone who keeps butting in, he stalks me and thinks he knows all about me, better than I know myself. Already at the harbour he made remarks I couldn't understand. He wraps himself in mystery, and now he's nowhere to be seen. He's a wicked god, this god of the Christians, no?"

Pausanias: "I knew it."

Aetheria: "No, you haven't the slightest idea. He goes to such lengths over a single soul? What a miserable greedy thing. Because I once dedicated myself to him, he won't let go of me. Maybe because I know him all too well, and can say what he's capable of."

"Tell me, Aetheria."

She sat pale and erect, in her eyes an angry gleam.

"I had a husband, his name was Valerio. He was killed in a quarrel. I know who stabbed him. But he didn't mean to kill him, he hadn't wanted to kill him, but my Valerio was dead all the same. God let him die. He was so young, no older than me. I'd become a Christian, like my women friends in the village, and Valerio was the main reason. I loved him so, I can't talk about it. I wanted to protect him, he often went to sea, accidents might happen. I prayed for him to the Christian god. He surely heard me, and knew how devoted I was to Valerio. But still *he* let him die. *He* killed him, Pausanias."

She glared at Pausanias. "And why? No reason, for I was pious. And *he's* wicked. My sin was my devotion to Valerio. *He* didn't like that. And at the time I made the pilgrimage to Rome I still didn't realise. I still didn't understand. I went with the others, and though I wasn't able to hold on to Valerio, I could at least avenge him. He gave me the dagger himself. I prayed and prayed every hour of the night as I lay awake, and every hour of the day, begging the Christian god for the strength to kill Sebastian. Oh how I humbled myself before him, and he despised me and toyed with me."

"You weren't able to kill him, Aetheria?"

"I could tear myself to pieces when I think about it. I stood there with the dagger after all that praying, and couldn't do it. God took away my strength." She shook her head and gazed bitterly into the distance. "What do you think of such a god, Pausanias? He kills my husband, and then he makes me defenceless so that everyone despises me and I despise myself. I've abjured him. He's not my god. I have a god, like everyone else. The Christians bring calamity on our heads when they teach about him and don't say who he really is."

"Oh, Aetheria, he's not as powerful as you think, not so almighty."

"He's a cold, wicked, spiteful god, he betrays his own believers. They all try hard as anything to understand him. But he toys with them, and he's jealous, he's envious. Look at me, Pausanias. I've declared myself free of him, and he can't bear it. So he sends someone else along to cross paths with me."

Pausanias listened to this in astonishment, and had no idea how to respond. So he asked: "What should happen now, Aetheria?"

She sat there rigid, determined. "I shall not go away from this his land, I shall not disappear, I shall stay. As far as I'm concerned he can do away with me as he did away with Valerio. What a triumph for a god, Pausanias, getting the better of some poor human. But he can't twist my arm. I won't follow his path. I shan't humble myself before him. I shan't call his name. Rhea and Hestia are my gods, and he hates them. Oh if only he were human and I could talk to him."

Driving out the Devil

Already during this conversation with Pausanias, she showed she was unwilling to give in.

Soon after she returned from Bethlehem, the following occurred.

As already mentioned, around Jerusalem there was a pious man, a certain Eusebius, who acted as guide and instructor of pilgrims, and found accommodation for them. He was cut from another cloth than venerable wise Ebonius. Eusebius often looked askance at Aetheria, because she seemed to belong to a type of Christian he detested: speakers in tongues, ecstasies. He clamped down on suspect babblings and jabberings at services. Now an entire gaggle of pilgrims returned from Bethlehem bringing miraculous news of Aetheria and the little star. Such news irritated him intensely. It baffled and enraged him. He could not hold back. This peasant woman from Italy put it about that she saw the star at the bottom of the well. Were it anyone else he would swiftly denounce her as a deceiver, in it only for the fame. But Aetheria did not fit the bill.

He fetched her in, questioned her, and could not let the incredible affair rest. He called all the pilgrims together for a service, men and women, where he read out a certain passage from Paul's first epistle to the Corinthians: "Neither be ye idolaters, as were some of them; as it is written, The people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play... God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it." Thus the first passage he read out.

The second: "I thank my God, I speak with tongues more than ye all; yet in the church I had rather speak five words with my understanding, that by my voice I might teach others also, than ten thousand words in an unknown tongue." The stern ascetic expanded these notions far beyond the chiding and exhortation of the holy apostle. Concerning Aetheria, who

was already agitated by his words, he spoke of his first impression of this lovely, free, outgoing person, and of what he had held back, for he wished only that she emerge from under the depraved pretence of her smooth mask. And now the opportunity had most amply occurred. He preached: "Twitching and babbling and throwing the limbs about during communal services are among the most repellent customs of the heathen, when they, men and women all together, offer themselves to their idols. In their so-called devotions they throw themselves to the ground, and behave like drunkards. They embrace and entwine, and with the names of their idols on their lips they expose themselves and intermingle. They even have idols that they claim are women. One they call Primal Mother, and to her they give the names Rhea and Cybele. Their adherents and believers are those who wander possessed, and rampage in mountains and forests with bells and cymbals calling Attis, Attis – for he was the mortal beloved of that female idol.

"Far too much of these intemperate beings still lives in the soul of many a man and woman, who imagine that, to give oneself to Christ, it suffices to accept holy baptism. You should know: God is Spirit, and does not live in unreason and frenzy, nor in dreams and ecstasies. A devil dwells behind such masks, yes indeed, a devil.

"And if someone were to go about in this land and declare that the star of the three holy kings had been spotted in the well, that this someone had seen it directly, this star that shows itself only to the consecrated, to the gravest, the most serious, the purest of the pure – and to such as these only rarely, for it is a boon beyond compare – then let this someone step forth now, and here in the chapel of God state openly: I did see it. But this someone must engage in self-examination, and think whether perhaps the Devil has set up a deception here. This someone must make an open declaration, here to this gathering of the faithful, so that each of us can show friendly concern and offer our prayers. And this someone must show contrition and undergo chastisement – so that the Devil may be driven out."

The word struck home as soon as Aetheria heard it: devil. She was possessed by a devil. So it was no big deal. The mysterious personage who called out the name 'Jerusalem' and spoke to her at the harbour, and went the whole hog to complete the mockery, shame her in public by leading her to the well – that was a devil. And she'd had to endure the little star's singing, ah such sweet singing, the words and the music echoed endlessly in her ears and lured her on: I am the star that journeyed here from the East, long ago.

Stern Eusebius had no idea of the effect his sermon had on Aetheria, the sinner. There's a devil in me: she could have heard no lovelier words. How wide her eyes are now; he's so enlightened, this Eusebius. All her fears evaporated. And she'd never suspected! It was all a devil's work, leading her to the well and hiding himself in the well and singing that song about coming here with the three kings, just to bewitch her.

In the little chapel, once Eusebius had made the others leave, she went down on her knees and confessed her sins. She had been baptised, but had never stopped quarrelling with God and his Heaven. A mysterious man kept appearing and speaking to her. He drove her here to the well at Bethlehem, it must have been he who magicked up the light at the bottom of the well and spoke and sang to her.

When Aetheria ended her confession, Eusebius called the other pilgrim women back in. Aetheria had to repeat all her confession. The women screamed in horror. At once Eusebius took Aetheria by the hand and led her, along with two of the women, into the little sacristy.

There he locked her in until evening came, when he ordered her to spend the night kneeling on chains, never lying down; and he denied her any food.

Next morning he summoned two lusty women to beat Aetheria with rods on her bare back, shoulders and arms until blood streamed down. But Aetheria uttered not a word. Not a blow was landing on her: every blow landed on that other one, the evil fellow who pestered her, the devil.

The devil in her was stubborn, refused to show himself. So towards noon the women tied Aetheria tight to the door, so tight that she screamed and couldn't move a muscle. They left her there all alone in the tiny room. Several of the faithful stayed day and night in the chapel, praying. At night they were sore afraid the door would open and the Devil would enter to rescue Aetheria.

For five days until Sunday they kept Aetheria tied up. She ate hardly anything, and received in silence the blows they inflicted. When Eusebius showed up once, she tried to kiss his hands, but he pulled away. With joy she offered her back and shoulders to the scourge.

Now she was no longer beautiful, Aetheria. She looked dirty, ugly, dilapidated, her dangling hair sticky with blood, where once she was Aetheria with the lovely raven locks. Though in torment, she never yielded. Away with him, even if I die! Sometimes they heard her scream obsessively, and when she bent under the whiplash and threw herself wholeheartedly into the pain, there arose in her more and more often a dreadful thought, a dreadful or a heavenly thought: Forgive me, I do this for Thee, because nothing else can I give – because I am so bad I accept these blows, for Thee.

She endured. She had to succeed.

Then came the great exorcism, conducted by Eusebius. She was weak and emaciated. She sank to the floor and lay for hours as if dead. Then they gave her food and drink. She was allowed, now clothed and untied, to stand at the door to the chapel and from there take part in the service.

She gave the most heartfelt thanks to Pastor Eusebius, and was allowed to go home.

Philosophy and love on Earth

For three hours she dragged herself along, until she reached the house where Pausonias dwelt. He was summoned, and came out. The sight that was Aetheria shocked him. He had searched for her. None of the women revealed where she was being kept.

He had a room prepared for her in the house. He sat by her bed and spoke kindly words. He asked no questions. Then he had to take a trip for a few days, and when he returned she was already able to welcome him standing up, with the calm friendly expression he knew of old. And now he stayed with her. How could he have gone away, Pausanias, when she heaped such good and tender words upon him, when she clung to him so gently, with such affection – when she was courting him.

During that time they had the following conversation:

“What have they done to you, my fair friend Aetheria? Who assaulted you, who beat you? I shall ride at once to Jerusalem and raise a complaint at law.”

“Why ride to Jerusalem, to the court, friend Pausanias, rather than sit here with me, and talk? Why raise a complaint, when I myself am the guilty one, and when nothing can happen to me? Stay here, allow me the pleasure of your company. It does me good to listen to you, and even when you stay silent. That you are here, Pausanias, is balm to my heart.”

“You won’t reveal, Aetheria, what they did to you, and who it was?”

“Does it make you sad, Pausanias?”

“Yes and no. Sad, yes, because you won’t confide in me. And no, because you want me at your side.”

“And so the blows they inflicted on me, Pausanias, have done you good. For I would never have spoken like this to you before.”

“Aetheria, dear friend, who was it who beat you? That this can happen in my country, and I must accept it in silence.”

“Yes, it does you good. Suffering often does good. My suffering has done me so much good, Pausanias, such immense good. And it was lovely how I endured it, this suffering. Must you go to Jerusalem, to Caesarea? Can’t you stay with me a while? I’d be so happy. I no longer go around with those other pilgrims. Stay here and tell me of your world, Pausanias, tell me all you know. I was always a stay-at-home, and even in Rome I knew only Christians. The world, the world, I’d love to know more about the world, and what people everywhere think, and what other people know.”

Pausanias laughed: “My dear Aetheria wants to be a pilgrim again, but in a new manner: what you now propose is a good and sensible pilgrimage. Out into the world, Aetheria. You know so little. Oh, the world is enormously big, who knows where it ends?”

Aetheria: “So what do people think? What do they know? I want to know everything. I don’t want ever to be caught out. I want to have all my answers ready. So tell me, Pausanias.”

Pausanias: “My dear Aetheria the philosopher! Oh, people do so much thinking. There are as many thoughts as there are breaths of air.”

Aetheria: “What do thoughts and air have in common?”

Pausanias: “They are as light and fleeting as a breath, and we cannot live without air, without ever renewed air.”

Aetheria, timidly: “But – is there Truth? Or is there no truth amid all those thoughts?”

Pausanias: “Many truths. Various truths. Mixtures of truth, just as air is a mixture of elements. There are countless truths, truths of every kind, in all conceivable phenomena, in the same way there are creatures, but a creature can be ant or frog or butterfly, bird or racehorse. And then plants.”

Aetheria winced: “No.” She does not follow, cannot follow, but would like to understand.

Pausanias: “Every creature is a truth. Every plant is a truth. Every vision is a truth. You are a truth. I am a truth.”

Aetheria, frowning: “And when grass is chewed and trampled by a sheep, where is truth then?”

Pausanias: "The sheep has obtained nourishment."

Aetheria: "Pooh. You are truth, I am truth, a fly is truth, a man is truth, a woman is truth – what nonsense. How can you think that?"

Pausanias: "Better than someone who, when asked about truth, says only 'Zeus' or 'God'. Try what I tell you on someone. Pull back the bolt on your door that you use to lock yourself in, step out into the world – yes, into the world. You want to, actually, and it's a goodly impulse. And it will do you good. My lovely friend, you feel you must keep something secret from me. I won't try to pry it out of you, I respect your decision. I'm happy that you've taken me to you, to me you're a goddess to whom I give myself and from whom I shall be grateful for all I receive. Your worshipper, fair Aetheria, shall now like a washerwoman spread undyed linen in the sunlight, so that it dries and is bleached nice and white. Let me lay out my thoughts before you. And let me sip from the clear mountain spring that is within you."

Aetheria: "The things you say, Pausanias! Are all Greeks like this?"

Pausanias: "All I know is, that when I sit at your side I am no Greek but only Pausanias. Just as you are no pilgrim from Salerno but the truth taken on by a female figure whom I adore, I know not how or why, and who is now my goddess and calls herself Aetheria until such time as I find another name for her."

Aetheria, trembling, distraught: "Kiss me, Pausanias."

She lingered at his lips, then grew calmer. Then she asked him to tell her whatever he liked.

Pausanias: "So much has changed, my sweet friend, in the last few seconds, the last half-minute, ever since you said 'Kiss me, Pausanias', that I must first contemplate how to restore the world to order. Let me think."

Aetheria: "Talk to me!"

Pausanias: "In these parts are great cities that once were famed and powerful. Mighty militarised Rome became the master of Greece, Athens is no longer Athens, Corinth no longer Corinth. But still they are Athens and Corinth. When I lived there and for a while had time on my hands, I often went to the Forum and strolled about the city, and every time it did me enormous good, and perked me up when I fell into doubt and confusion, unable to find my feet amid all the truths that surrounded and pressed in on me. Sometimes as I did so I even lost sight of myself. In Athens I'd go to the Forum and hear the philosophers. Oh, it was wonderful, Aetheria. There are so many philosophers, and each one knows everything. That's good, I said to myself. But the problem with philosophy is that philosophers refute each other's claims. Philosophy should be condensed into just one person, and be declared out of bounds to the rest of us. A Law Commission should be established to control the Forum, backed up by armed force, to eradicate all philosophers except one.

"I chatted with a few philosophers, and my plan was well received. Each sage showed great enthusiasm for my doctrine, and confided that he'd reached the same conclusion long ago. I was advised to go to the authorities and arrange suitable measures for eliminating the other philosophers. But then, after such a happy and promising start, a tiny, seemingly insignificant glitch presented itself: how to put it into practice? Easy enough to get rid of people – but who was to be left alive? The City Council suggested: Get rid of them all, then? In the interest of Truth, which is the highest good, I replied somewhat troubled: 'There is no alternative'.

“Then we called a meeting of all the philosophers we came across at the Forum, and even those who sat quietly at home, ones I’d met with and questioned in great secrecy. And I was now tasked by the City Council to present my charitable proposal to them, and to the good citizens of Athens. Without exception, every single philosopher was enthusiastic. They all agreed that this was what they’d all been waiting for. Our next step was an immediate secret ballot: who was to be eliminated? And we found when the votes were scrutinised: every last philosopher was to be eliminated, except for the one who had cast the ballot!

“So there was no way to implement my plan. And then I realised, enriched by this experience, where the problem lay. Not with the philosophers, but with me. I was asking too much. I was annoyed by the multiplicity of philosophers. But this was unjust. I noticed in my head, in my heart, an unease, a dreadful unease. My head had a right to pose questions. But the questions it posed were bad, childish.”

Aetheria: “So what did you do then, Pausanias?”

Pausanias: “During my strolls I noticed not just philosophers, but ordinary people too. They set about all kinds of tasks. Once I watched a man remove the roof, the damaged roof, from his house, and timbers and stones came tumbling down. I contemplated this scene most attentively, being in search of answers, and I profited from it. Look at that stone, Pausanias, I said to myself. How does it behave? What does it intend? With regard to itself, and to other stones? That’s the kind of question philosophers pose with regard to human beings and the state, the community. But what does the stone do? It tumbles down. Whatever the circumstances. With ineffable challenging certitude. Such unambiguity, clarity, purpose, such consistency, and, for all its simplicity, such courage and self-assurance. Then, Aetheria, I compared the stone to human beings, and I found: it has not so much to do with humans.”

Aetheria: “That would be the case with cripples, who can’t move by themselves, or the dead, when they’re laid out flat and all they are is a dead weight and they’re left as an offering to dampness and worms, and then they’d be the wisest, the real sages.”

Pausanias: “You’ve said it, Aetheria! Yes, at the end, at the very end, every living thing realises, however hard its brain resists the thought: it did not create itself. This is the grandeur, the glory, the divine in the world: that in the end it has dominion over our brain, our myriad thoughts, and calls them to order. In the end there’s nothing but heavy and damp, or dry.”

Aetheria: “So that’s what you discovered on your strolls through those big cities Athens and Corinth, friend Pausanias. And it seems, since my friend is telling me of it, that he still holds to it. And what does my worldly-wise friend say of the men and women who came with me into this land to pray? What does he think of Christians? They know what God teaches.”

Pausanias: “Who knows it? There are many gods. I can’t choose among them, and so I grant all of them their validity and revere them all. One god, of course, is the greatest!”

Aetheria: “Which one?”

Pausanias: “The moment.”

Aetheria: “Explain.”

Pausanias: “The moment contains everything. It bestows truth on all things, and that truth disappears with the moment. The moment has a dreadful foe, that stalks it like a lion and brings it down. That foe is Time. Think what a moment is, and what it gives and is: Truth, and

then how Time lurks in the dark and as soon as it appears the lion pounces and bites it in the neck and kills it, oh Aetheria. By the way, how I love the sound of your name! It's almost the same as Hetaira.

Aetheria: "Meaning?"

Pausanias: "A female companion, a beloved."

Aetheria: "I see you're so worldly-wise, too much so, and now you'd like to relax – me too. That's why you now touch on love."

Pausanias: "And where is love? In the moment. Yes, it's the answer to every question, it settles every question before you even ask. It is there. It allows no doubt to arise. Now what is grass? All that the alien litany knows is that 'grass withers'. But what is withering against the Moment of existence? The millions of years that triumph so detestably over generations of grasses are incapable of bringing forth even one blade of grass."

She sighed.

Pausanias: "You don't understand? How about this?" He kisses her hand.

"Yes."

Pausanias: "Is it sweet?" – Aetheria: "Yes."

Pausanias: "Is sweetness something that gladdens and soothes?"

Aetheria: "It's sweet ... because ..." – Pausanias: "Because ...?"

Aetheria: "Because I would really like something in the world to be sweet."

Pausanias: "And If I place an arm around your waist and draw you closer, does the sweetness in you, the gladness in you, grow?"

Aetheria: "And if I place my lips to your ear and snuggle closer to you and say: you, my dear Pausanias, are a rascal, a deceiver, a seducer, does the sweetness in you grow?"

Pausanias: "And if I then heave a sigh and have nothing more to say except Aetheria, beloved ..."

Aetheria: "Then we'd better break off now."

Pausanias: "Why? What for?" – Aetheria: "So we can go on learning."

Pausanias: "The highest joy requires no instruction. It grows in trees like the smile on your lips. Like sweet cream rising to the top of the milk, it gathers there as all good things gather at the surface when they are ripe, so they may enter into existence. And so I hold you and sip the cream I'm allowed to sip. And now you're looking at me. What are you thinking, Aetheria?"

Aetheria: "Leave me for a little while, Pausanias."

Pausanias: "Memories? Time, I said, is our arch-enemy. Memory his accomplice. How Time promises everything so as to weaken the Moment. He covers our soul with a layer of mould."

Aetheria, shivering: "To be as rigid as a stone?" – Pausanias: "So bitter, Aetheria."

Aetheria: "I'd like to be everything, anything a human being can ask for, just only not thinking, not knowing."

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Aetheria lay enchanted on the beach at Caesarea, on hot sand. That man said grass and sand were Truth, and there was no truth apart from these: truth a sunbeam, a flash of lightning.

As she lay there she was no longer real. She hovered among various beings. The Earth was populated by them, air and sky too, by these invisible beings, active, and they were all there and much else along with them.

Pausanias: "What's going on, Aetheria? I've sat an hour here at your side, watching you."

Aetheria: "So?"

Pausanias: "You were dreaming. Something caught hold of you."

Aetheria: "Caught hold? Me?"

And again it came to her. Humming and jingling, words wafted past that the shepherd had sung, back there at the cistern; cherubim exulting.

She sat up. Oh I do not want this. Release me. She flung herself at Pausanias' breast. What sin have I committed that they pursue me so. And she told him more about the mysterious being that kept stalking her.

She groaned: "Someone's bewitching me. It's Satan. Protect me, Pausanias. Promise me you'll hold me tight, stand by me."

Pausanias laughed: "Patience, my anxious dreaming Aetheria. You'll soon find out which is stronger, this god, or mine: the Moment."

Then, when he was about to go on a trip inland, she asked him to take her with him. She did not want to be his wife. He was glad she wasn't leaving him.

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On various trips, shorter and longer, Aetheria saw and heard a great deal, and paid attention to many things.

Everything happens at different levels, it seemed to her. Day follows day, sunrise, sunset. Plants and trees grow, new plants appear, new animals too. This was a placid, friendly level.

Then big, slow, all-pervasive things. People, states, the nations that build cities, wage wars, make peace. This was a very exalted level, very different from plants and animals and stars.

And then individual human beings. They are driven along, embedded in the course of the stars and the general growing, blooming, withering. Actually they're lost amid it all, but they can't exist without it, and it gives them little peace.

And then the invisible, so much is invisible, nameless entities, ghosts, demons, angels.

Tall as a palm tree the angel stood over Aetheria and enveloped her as in a cloak. She did as she wanted, but never abandoned the blue cloak. She moved as if in a bell jar, never leaving its protection. It allowed nourishment to flow into her soul. For if her body received nourishment from the earth, what was it that nourished her soul? People looked only down at the earth, soil, crops, at trees bearing fruit, at vines, at animals and cool springs. The teeth wanted to bite, the mouth wanted to swallow, the stomach wanted to be full. But at the same time other nourishment flowed to them.

They never saw nor heard what room they occupied, or what table they dined at. Such endless bustle, such music that their ears never perceived.

Once when Pausanias and his pretty Italian friend were trekking through a place in the mountains, a monk came into their field of vision. He went his way in silence. People avoided him. He hiked up onto the mountain where he dwelled alone.

Aetheria spotted him long before Pausanias pointed him out.

"How do you like that fellow, Aetheria?"

"Who is he? Where did he come from?"

"There are many who come from Egypt, or Syria. Many dwell in the desert. Many hide away in forests. They find it's not enough to worship a god on the martyr's cross, they have to martyr themselves. They detest human flesh. The moment and what it offers means nothing to them."

The monk limped. He dragged himself along the path with his staff, beneath a harsh sun. Over his left shoulder lay a filthy pelt. Flies swarmed overhead.

Aetheria closed her eyes. What a country. Poor, filled with ruins. But people came here from far and wide.

She was shocked. Her heart quivered. The angel was silent. Pausanias wanted to take her to Corinth. She pleaded: "Leave me here."

Pausanias: "I thought so. What will you do here? You asked me to protect you. I don't want to leave you like this. Don't you love me any more?"

Aetheria: "I'm still fond of you. Maybe I'll love you even more. Leave me here."

Pausanias: "You'll busy yourself with these fools here. Is it good for you, Aetheria? They'll tell you nothing new. Look at me. Are you toying with the idea of becoming Christian again?"

She cried out: "No, No!"

He held her hand: "You're right, a thousand times right. You won't listen to these people any more. You've found out what they're like. You are and always will be Aetheria, and I am Pausanias. For our brief lives, that's enough."

She whispered: "You are right. I know it."

Pausanias: "Let the world go to pot. We didn't make it, and we didn't create ourselves. We lead our lives as best we can. And that's why my god is the Moment."

Aetheria: "Oh, now I understand it very well."

Pausanias: "Come with me. Don't let thoughts devour you."

Aetheria: "But I must stay here. You'll be back. I shan't forget you. I cannot come with you, Pausanias. I was called to Jerusalem. No, I shall not flee."

She was resolute, he could see.

Pausanias: "I see my beloved Aetheria wavering. It grieves me."

Aetheria: "Why, Pausanias?"

Pausanias stares at the ground: "I've had so much from you that does me good. It seems to me that with your help I've become a different person, better. I know what they'll say about me at Corinth. They'll say: Our good Pausanias is going to join the Christian faith, someone's been instructing him, it must be a woman."

Aetheria hid her face in his breast.

Part 3: The Noble Syrian

A pair of halfwits

Pausanias had left on his travels. Aetheria had no idea where to. In Caesarea two men took an interest in her.

Aetheria had to keep them at bay. One was a clever chap who posed as a man of education, the other was a peasant. She had a feeling she would soon go on another voyage, whither she did not yet know.

These two kept a jealous eye on one another. In order to know what the other was up to, they hired a strapping peasant lass from a mountain village. She had to keep herself busy in the house in which both of them lived, and now Aetheria too, and generally help out. Every evening when they returned home, she ran to meet them and make a report.

Eleutherios, the clever of the two, had heard all sorts of things, and had a notion that Aetheria needed to be put right. The instruction he offered his innamorata, this woman he courted, was well meant and childish. Aetheria had come here with a load of Christian pilgrims, so he told her what enlightened people hereabouts thought of the world and creation.

First, God gave his thunder-locks a shake and then, when people grew wicked, started hurling down his thunderbolts as an incentive to offer more sacrifices and practice less deceit. When God was at his wits' end with regard to humans and had to send down a Deluge, he called naturally enough on his brother Poseidon to help with this great waterworks; Poseidon appeared at once with his iron trident, ready to jab dreadful great holes in the Earth, whereat waters would spurt forth from below; God himself would manage the water from above.

As for the Ark in which humanity preserved itself for forty days, it was constantly attended by nereids and huge schools of blowing dolphins that had to drive away mighty sea creatures – whales and sharks and the like. The Ark was made of wood, and easy to capsize. But God had provided pious Noah with full instructions concerning length, breadth and height. The actual construction was overseen by Vulcan the Smith, who knew all about ironworking, nails and soldering. Now at last, times have changed, he's able to do some sensible and serious work that will go down in history, not just hammer out those very artistic shields and helmets so eloquently described by Homer. All that stuff was of no consequence, for who knows anything these days about Achilles' shield and helmet, though once they were so renowned?

On the other hand, the salvation of humanity – that's something else. Oh, by that time the gods had long since ceased to play any great role; their sphere of activity had shrunk; they were exhausted by deeds of love and heroism, and had done all that could be done. Now the world was on a different footing, and that meant the salvation of humanity, and first of all the saving of Noah and his family.

Thus did Eleutherios natter away and enlighten the pretty peasant woman from Italy, and she seemed all ears.

Vulcan completed his Ark commission in the shortest time imaginable. But now a difficulty arose. Noah didn't want to leave dry land and his beloved vineyards. Poseidon raged and

reminded Vulcan of the deadline by which he would absolutely have to dig those prescribed holes in the earth, whether Noah turned up or not. Human beings, even in these days, should not have any fancy notion that he, a superannuated worn-out under-god, can just stand around waiting for Mister Noah to sleep off his hangover. God calmed him down, and everything proceeded according to plan, and even more smoothly than any of the participants had dared to expect. It rained, waters came from above and below, they were afloat, they were in the Ark well supplied with all their needs, and looked forward to several peaceful weeks without needing to work.

Such foolish tales from her admirers entertained and distracted Aetheria. Mostly she let her imagination roam. Then the clever Greek came along with another chapter of which he was very proud, but which fell totally flat. It concerned angels and their role in the world. As little as he knew of this topic, the more he babbled of it to his faithful Italian beauty. And so, having brought Noah back to a normal life, he made an elegant leap to the mighty angel Bacchus and his friend Dionysus, who went about mostly on billy-goats. But Aetheria would have none of it; she yawned as he nattered on about the exploits of Dionysus, and called him a windbag. And she entirely lost patience when he called Dionysus an angel who was one of Christ's followers. She was so annoyed by his foolish talk that he could not make amends.

The other man, the simple peasant, was puzzled how best to approach her. He listened as Eleutherios entertained their mutual friend. And he came upon the notion of telling her what he knew of those hermits, the monks from Syria and Egypt who dwelled in the vicinity. She expressed a desire to be taken to them, so he went about and made enquiries.

*

A roar: "Aetheria".

It came again.

Then not a sound.

The roar was accompanied by a confused din, as if the voice rose out of a crowd of people approaching, a mob.

It came no closer, but the uproar continued.

Now a bugle-call ripped the air. To arms! To arms!

When Aetheria rose from her bed and ran to the door and peered anxiously out, she realised: it was – the Other. She ran back inside. Then something she did not understand was spoken into her ear. "She replied: "I am no warrior. Summon soldiers."

"You are no warrior? So who was it who bragged 'I shall not follow, I won't give up, I can defend myself?'"

"Since you ask: yes, it was I."

"It was you."

"Yes."

"And you are not a Christian?"

"Not everyone has to be a Christian."

“Now you are shameless.”

“Don’t think that you, staying invisible and hiding yourself away somewhere, can scold me like this. Come, show yourself.”

“I am here. If you can’t see me, that’s down to your own eyes. Say, Aetheria: am I here?”

She hugged herself tight and muttered: “Yes.”

“To arms! Present yourself. I am not the little star in the well at Bethlehem that spoke so tenderly to you. It spoke so gently and you could not help but listen to it. It told you of the long journey it undertook in olden times to bring people to Christ, so they could adore Him when he appeared, even in the crib. Why did the star speak? You should do the same. That’s why! Instead, instead ...”

The voice grew incoherent with anger, unintelligible. And then: “Instead. Instead.” There were many voices. A terrible clamour, as if a huge mob of people approached. She buried her head in the pillow.

And again: “Instead, instead.”

Later she pulled herself together and began to speak: “My eyes cannot see you, you know this. You are angry with me. But I’m not afraid of you. Are you there?”

“Beside you, over you, around you.”

“I know you can do anything. I’ll answer you only because you spoke of the well and the star. I don’t understand, you mysterious being that stands over me with a whip and is in league with the Christian God, how is it you can speak of the star that showed itself to me at the well – to me, and no one else? Do you know who I am? You say you’re beside me, around me, in me. But I’d like to see you, see what manner of being you are. Tell me, who sent the star to me? Who let me see and hear the star, but doesn’t know who I am and I haven’t been a Christian for a long while now? For years, ever since I was in Rome, I’ve no longer been a Christian. When I set off from Portosa with the others on the way to Rome, I was a Christian. Then no more. Now you say nothing. You no longer roar To arms, to arms. You don’t ask why, Aetheria, why did you stop being a Christian? Because you already know the answer. And then I’m still not left in peace and I’m not allowed to go my own road. I was lured there to the star. I’m not pure, I’m not pious, I’m not good. I’m a murderess, whether or not I committed the act on Sebastian back in Rome. I wanted him dead. And if Sebastian hadn’t hit me and knocked me to the floor, I would have done what I set out to do and would be a murderess in everyone’s eyes. So why was the star allowed to speak to me, when a hundred pilgrims were there, pious men and women not as wicked as me, and they were never shown the light.”

Tumult: “To arms! To arms!”

Aetheria was furious: “Yes, to arms, do battle against me, but I’ve long known how you fight, your evil way of fighting. You want to weaken me so I skip along behind you like a meek little lamb. You won’t rest until I fall into despair and beg you: Do this or that to me, do whatever you want. To arms, to arms – you against a helpless woman. Because I can’t see you, because human eyes can’t see you invisible beings, you can do this to us. I am simply Aetheria. But ever since I’ve known God, that hard unjust God, I know I shall remain steadfast and what you’re trying to do to me will be all in vain.”

“Silence.”

“Why don’t you call out To arms? Why do you call out anything? I’m easy enough to be done away with.”

“God is courting you.”

“God is my enemy. God is toying with me.”

“Serpent, slaving serpent, will you be silent, before someone kicks your head to pieces.”

This sounded so uncannily stupid that she crumpled.

“Bend down. But bend down not your flesh only, your sinful limbs. Bend down your soul. Serpent that slavers and thinks to dare this! It won’t be long before you throw yourself into the slough of despond. You will worship that moment. But you will be devoured by Nothingness. Aetheria, Aetheria, what have you tried already as you seek to withdraw from God? You let them whip you half to death in the chapel. Because you saw the star, and it spoke kindly to you and tasked you to tell of it and act like it, you have put yourself under a curse.”

She muttered: “I am what I am. I am not pious. Why does the star speak to me, why am I to go about telling of it?”

“I shall not answer that, because you deserve no answer. You shall stand up now. The peasant shall lead you into the mountains. You shall stand before the hermit, and you shall do whatever he tells you.”

And again that awful shout, that tumult: “To arms! To arms!”

The Hermit

Aetheria was led by the peasant to a spring, and there she encountered the hermit. She had to be patient: the pious man kept walking by, eyes downcast. Once when she made a move and he deigned to notice her, he threatened her with his staff. When she doggedly kept talking, he turned his back, and commanded her to retreat into the bushes and direct her questions at him from there.

He was an ascetic, a follower of John the Baptist. He lived in a cave above the spring. She often heard sounds of flagellation and whipping. When he appeared at the spring early in the morning, sunlight was just touching the woodland floor, and from the bushes she observed the little man, emaciated down to skin and bone. His hair was a lion’s mane, the white-grey beard hung tangled down his chest. His bare skinny legs were scored with long bloody scratches. He drank from the spring and poured cold water over arms, chest and legs, and stood in the sun to dry.

Once she sat by the spring, and as he came down he shouted at her from a distance to clear off. She hid in the bushes. But when he had drunk and splashed himself and stood there silent, she gathered her courage and posed her question:

“Venerable Father, the Saint John that you follow was a teacher. Will you teach me?” Then she said: “John wore a garment of camel hair, and his sustenance was grasshoppers and wild honey. He called on people to repent.”

The ascetic: "He was the Precursor. This is a Precursor-world. Every tree that fails to bear good fruit shall be felled and cast into fire."

Aetheria: "I have heard it said that Christ came and healed the sick. You inflict wounds on your body."

"Because I am no Christ, but a wretched sinner, like you. My body must obey me and keep silent when I think, and must not make me its servant."

He groaned, turned about without another word, and clambered back up to his cave. Soon she heard him groan, groan louder, utter wild sobs and words she could not make out, and then the crack of a whip.

Now Aetheria went down into the woods and broke off some willow twigs. She secreted herself deep in the scrub and bared her upper body and her legs. Up there in the ascetic's cave, all was silent. She took a slender bundle of twigs in her hand, and began to belabour herself.

As she lashed out, tears came. She screamed and wept. She wept aloud, louder, groaned and sobbed in a frenzy and could not stop and had to keep lashing herself, but the pain was unable to quash her torment and her fear: Abandoned and cast out, that's me, no one can protect me, for me there's no salvation.

Blood trickled from her shoulders. If only she could feel more pain. She raged blindly against herself, at first only with twigs, then with fists and fingernails, until consciousness departed and she collapsed.

She came to during the night, under cold air. Her wounds throbbed and burned. She crawled through silence to the spring, and washed. She drank. She noticed she was hungry. She plucked some leaves, chewed.

Towards morning the hermit came down, saw bloodstains by the spring, looked about him and heard her groaning and moving about in the scrub. He said a prayer out loud and asked who was there. She said her name. He asked: "Did someone attack you?" When she made no reply, he commanded her to show herself. He approached her.

She lay on the ground, face down. Her lacerated back was bare, her right hand held tight to the twig bundle. The grass around was sprinkled with blood.

"You were ambushed, woman?"

"I beat myself."

He stood for a while, silent. Then he said: "Go to the spring, and wash. Then call me."

She did so. He came and she told him she had lashed herself and would keep lashing herself even if it killed her. He replied: "Don't you dare to kill yourself."

"Why is suicide not permitted, when doing penance might kill you?"

"Because you must do even more penance. That is why you may not discard your body that serves your penance."

*

Days passed. Weeks passed. She kept alive in the forest, and found a cave below the spring where she sat and lay and waited. Emptiness, fear and repugnance in her.

The voice that used to come to her no longer spoke.

The hermit came down to the spring day after day, clambered silently back up.

Her mouth was shut tight. She had no idea what to ask him. Into what abyss had she plunged. She was weary of life, disgusted with herself. No hope; hour after hour nothing but torment and despair.

But care was taken that she should not collapse utterly. The angel watched over her close by, as she lay asleep. He was at her side when she stood and reached for the twigs. Pain made her stronger. The angel nudged her to seek food. But blackness would not leave her soul.

*

After Aetheria had spent months in the woods by the spring, alone, tormented, and the only words she spoke were down on the road to beg for food, she was no longer Aetheria the strong pretty peasant woman who once lived at Portosa by Salerno, who made a pilgrimage to Rome and departed from Rome proud and defiant; Aetheria who voyaged across the sea and saw nothing but joy all about her – fleeing all the while from God, but guarded by his angels.

She was a wan silent female, and now, even without falling into ecstatic raptures, she had the pale tender transparent beauty that befitted her name Aetheria. She prayed a lot, silently, not knowing what she did. It came from her, she was not accountable. All she saw as she glanced about her was changed. She watched animals in the forest for a while, how they hid and kept a furtive lookout. She listened for hours to birdcalls and responses. And when once she wandered deeper into the village – the place she herself had come from – she was amazed.

For this was a place she knew, where those two, the clever man and the peasant, had courted her. Towards evening they passed her by, one after the other, and failed to recognise the beggar woman. She sat on a rock in the dusty street, silent, hand outstretched.

What did they do, the people here? She had lost all conception of them. She fled distraught back to her woods. She felt safer in her cave. She wanted never to go back among people.

She wanted to hide away, like the hermit.

*

She was freezing, in bright sunshine. For hours she lay listless and without thought in her cave. Then she grew tormented and restless. But tears never came.

This dragged on a long while. And in her, week by week, tension grew. She wished it would lead to death. Her thoughts played this way and that, and never arrived. She no longer understood her past, her self. It occurred to her: I have become a dumb beast that breathes, eats, drinks. It is my punishment. But she could not hold on even to this thought.

Once she heard in the night: “You wanted to find distraction in the world. You wanted to empty yourself out. But you should curl yourself back into yourself.”

The emptiness was so dreadful that in terror she had no idea how to save herself: It’s Satan, Satan has me in his claws. He’s dragging me down to Hell.

In terror she ran to the spring and lay groaning for so long that the hermit appeared: “What are you doing?”

“I cannot live. Satan has me in his grasp.”

The hermit gave a little laugh. It was the first time she had heard him titter: "That's right." And then: "Did you think he'd leave us unscathed here in the woods, in our caves? He knows where to find us."

"Help me, so help me, please."

"Don't call on me. Call on God. Pray."

"I cannot pray."

Again the titter: "That's right, that's right."

*

So she lay for hours afraid, not moving, in the scrub. The hermit came to fetch water, she kept quite still. And suddenly, as he left, she was mysteriously immersed in the words of the Song of Songs:

"I will rise now, and go about the city in the streets, and in the broad ways I will seek him whom my soul loveth: I sought him, but I found him not.

"The watchmen that go about the city found me: to whom I said, Saw ye him whom my soul loveth?

"It was but a little that I passed from them, but I found him whom my soul loveth."

Anyone with human eyes – a woodcutter, say, or a bird-catcher, or even a hermit – could see tree trunks in the forest and piles of dead leaves, and here and there heaps of earth. He could drink at the spring and notice how the water runs clear and ice-cold. At morning he could see the forest catch fire with the rising of the sun, and later the golden glow become brightness and dark shadows, and as evening falls the darkness swallows colour after colour until the rich resonant forest with all its creatures is melted into darkness, and shut away in its cupboard.

Aetheria's angel no longer brought warcries to her ears – To arms! To arms! – and no longer threatened her – Instead, instead.

It conversed with the higher angels that are closer to the wellspring of life, blessedness and grace. It spoke and sang with them. And more strength, a deeper joy penetrated into the being that called itself Aetheria, into the cavern of her tormented mortal body.

*

Aetheria wore a belt of thorns around her waist, but there was no more flagellation.

She sat at the foot of the mountain in the shade of an olive tree. A camel caravan was approaching. She heard the voice of the man who rode on the lead camel.

Aetheria retreated farther into shadow. She sighed: "I am the game, God is the hunter."

The man on the camel said: "He's a good gardener. He watches over his plants."

When she stepped out of the shadow, the words were in her. Someone had spoken to her.

See him sitting there, Aetheria

See him sitting there, Pilgrim Aetheria. Hour after hour he sits unmoving in the pavilion before the house.

In the evening when it grows cool he drags himself up the hill. A servant supports him. He speaks to no one.

“He is a nobleman from Syria. Have you noticed him, Aetheria?”

“I have not approached near to him. The sight of him chokes me. Let go of me.”

“So do not go and do not stay, proud Aetheria, but gaze on people as if they are pictures. He is letting himself slide into the abyss.”

“What am I? What can I offer him?”

“You do not know what you have, just as you do not know who you are. Yesterday you were a seed, today you are leaf and stem, tomorrow buds will show brown.”

“What are you saying?”

“The swimmer is emerging from the water. Now he lifts his head, now the face, now the throat, shoulders, chest, now he stands on his feet and gives a shake.”

“What on earth...?”

“One thing follows another. Go to him, Aetheria. This is no longer a time for you to sit in a cave and curl into yourself. You must move now, you already see more than your eyes show. All will become clear. Go to him. You have tears.”

“Longing, and grief. What more is to happen to me? Am I still not at the end? Oh, what have I done, how have I sinned? If only I were back in Portosa, on my little field. If only I had stayed there. If only I’d never gone as a pilgrim ...”

“Aetheria, do you shrink back in fear? Why does the sight of him oppress you?”

“It’s my fault, I am guilty. We were young, Valerio and I. He loved me, and I egged him on. I played with him that first time. He was poor and I was poor, and I told him I wanted to go all made up, glorious in silks, like those Salerno women. I said it. But did I want it? I was just egging him on.”

“And?”

“So he went off to Salerno and brought back silk. I never told him to go to Salerno and bring me silk. I was just blurting out words.”

“When he wanted the first kiss from you.”

“Yes, he loved me so inordinately, just as I loved him later. So he came back with the silk.”

“In Salerno a man lay stabbed.”

“He confessed to me. I never drove him to it.”

“Speak.”

“Then there was no holding me back. I don’t know why, I don’t know why, I don’t know. I flung myself at Valerio like fire in dry undergrowth. We burned as if the blood he had spilled kindled our love. In the village they said we were so happy, so blissful, as only young lovers can be.”

“And when he attacked the Greek merchant convoy?”

“By then the fire in me was fading. Valerio didn’t want it to go out. He looked around for more kindling. He kept begging, begging. I understood him very well. I loved him more fiercely when he begged like that. But I trembled for him.”

“Then they brought him back, to Aetheria. Now, Aetheria, you speak otherwise than you spoke in Rome, with Ebonius. Back then you raised complaints against God. Stop rubbing your eyes, Aetheria, they have wept enough. Take a good look at him, sitting there in the pavilion, not moving. He’s about to slide into the abyss.”

“What am I to do? What can I do for him? Does he want my blood? I’ll gladly give it him.”

“You are to be cleansed. You are a guilty person. Mercy keeps good hold of you. The bridegroom has stood up. What was it you sang earlier? Say it.”

“Have you seen the one
That my soul loves ...?
Hardly had I passed by the watchmen
When I found the one that my soul loves.”

“That’s what I sang. Oh how you draw me on. There’s something heavenly about you.”

And if there were nothing heavenly in Aetheria herself, if she would not rejoice as I stroke her hair, puff breath on her eyes. I part her lips, so that she can speak and give out what is in her. See how he sits there, the nobleman from Syria.

“What should I say to him?”

“Approach him. Speak. You’ll know it all.”

*

Angels do not play like children in that distant Heaven. They raise up fallen humankind broken under a monstrous burden. The name of that burden is Sin and Guilt.

They contend for people, for their brothers and sisters of yesterday and tomorrow.

*

Long did she hesitate, the pilgrim Aetheria, before that sad unmoving man.

“Must I wander forever, always a pilgrim? Never able at last to forget, to be snuffed out?”

The angel urged: “Get moving. Why are you idle? You think God lets you sit and stare?”

“I bow down, I regret what I have done. Do with me what you will.”

“You hypocrite, always the hypocrite.”

“What am I to do? What can I do, other than submit to mercy and disgrace? You succeeded in making me talk like this, at least. Isn’t it enough? Demand of me what you will. Kill me.”

“You’d like that. I have to drag you, I have to trample you, I want to be rid of you. You’ve got yourself into a tangle.”

The angel stood in the sun in front of her, a vertical beam of light. She cowered back into shadow. He pursued her, stared into her face, and laughed:

“Such a lovely life you lead, that you cannot bear to put it behind you! Look, Aetheria, I’ve prepared a great big treasure chest for you, it contains wonderful things, many I can’t describe.

But no silk, this time. Some adornments are lovelier, more glamorous than silk. When you are clad in these adornments, the ladies of Salerno will regard their own garments as rags. And no one has to steal these marvels for you. You will find them for yourself. Come, Aetheria, open up the treasure chest.”

“Where is it?”

“With him who sits sad and immobile beneath the canopy. He is sitting on the chest. When he stands up and returns home hale and hearty, the chest will be yours. Aetheria, you sang me a little song. Sing one to him as well. What song is sounding in your ears? What song, Aetheria, Aetheria, pilgrim?”

“About the little star that guided the kings from the Orient to Bethlehem.”

“Sing.”

“Long, long ago I was the star
that came from Orient afar.
In his crib the Christ Child lay,
I shine, so all can find the way.”

The noble Syrian

Simri lived a long while at the court of the Syrian princeling Hadad Djori. In Syrian lands he was famous. He devised tunes, wrote poems, and sang. Then he vanished for a time from the court, came back, and carried on as before. As always he was a treat to look at: the huge beard, coal-black in the old days, now shot through with grey and white, his movements less boisterous than before, the smiles less frequent. The prince rewarded him, and Simri listened eagerly to reports of all that had happened during his absence, here in the prince’s city, and in Syria, and in the Roman Empire – everything important and trivial, public and private. He talked with the new men, listened to songs of the younger poets, lavished praise.

He brought nothing back with him from his venture into seclusion. In conversation those times were skated over. He must have opened up to the prince, for after his return Hadad Djori, who was the same age and had grown up with him, granted him lengthy audiences. The two men debated during their long walks.

Two years passed, and it was time for Simri, a constant fixture in the prince’s entourage, to vanish without a word, leaving puzzlement behind. He seems not even to have confided in his princely friend, for every day following this second disappearance a place for him was still made ready at table, and Hadad Djori delayed the start of the meal. Music played again and again, alluring, songs written by Simri, set to music by him.

But he had vanished. And this time he stayed away. The prince had enquiries made in villages and towns, as far afield as Antioch. He seemed to keep an open mind: had Simri been recruited by the Romans, had he been killed in a quarrel, was he imprisoned in some dungeon?

The prince grieved for his friend. Others thought: Maybe he ran off with a fair lady.

And so year after year passed. At court his name was never mentioned now. Too many in those days were passing from the land of the living.

Then one night the prince was accosted by a dreadful apparition. It was soon after midnight. The prince was fast asleep, suddenly he sat up in a daze, eyes wide open, heart pounding. For something was descending from the ceiling, a black thing, coiling and uncoiling; its body smooth and slender and clad in flapping fabric. It pounced on the prince and tried to strangle him.

Hadad Djori screamed like a madman: "Help! Help!" It was a ghost. It was Simri. The prince sat up and beat about him. He punched at the black fluttering flapping mass as it retreated to a corner of the room and up to the ceiling, where it vanished.

People entered. The prince was lying across the edge of his bed, on his stomach, still flailing blindly about him, over his head, into the corner, until they set him upright and laid him back down on the bed.

Candles were brought. He was offered wine, he grabbed at it, swallowed it at a gulp and asked for more. He pointed to the corner: It was Simri.

They realised he'd been dreaming. Awaiting orders, they stood for a while quietly in the room. The candles burned brightly, driving back all darkness, the prince glared around suspiciously at the others. They'd better stay in the room. And he went back to sleep.

In the morning he summoned his chancellor: Simri is dead, his ghost came to me in the night. What should I do? Did he try to kill me? He gave details. The chancellor had already heard. Hadad Djori seemed to accept the advice of his trusted counsellors, but the fear never left him. A week later he knew with certainty: he must hurry to Simri's aid.

No pleas from his mother, no supplications from his counsellors held him back.

Hadad Djori set off in the company of just two riders. Where he should head to he had no idea, and did not say.

For seven months they crisscrossed the hot lands. Long mountain chains, a valley in between that was called Hollow Syria. To the east, mountains rise like a wall, in the west they drop steeply to the sea. They looked for Simri in Baalbek, city of temples, on the green plains of Hems and Hama; they followed the Orontes River; wandered past Mount Hermon, its dome dazzling with snow. They were led to the Jordan, to lakes and swamps, the sea of Tiberias. They sought him in the valley of Jericho, among date palms and lemon trees.

Hadad Djori thought of sending envoys to Rome, to conduct searches there and save his friend and himself. Then a brighter, more friendly day came. The two riders were trotting ahead. People were toiling in a vineyard. Hadad Djori felt a compulsion to look back, and there, bent, haggard, with slow hobbled steps, carrying a rake and a knife, was Simri, climbing up to the vineyard.

Hadad Djori, overcome with pity, grief and joy, was unable to dismount. When the riders noticed that he'd come to a stop, they turned back and helped him down from the horse. He told them to wait. They saw him head slowly towards the vineyard, where an old man had just started work on the vines. Hadad Djori stood behind him. The peasant turned and moved aside to let him pass, but the prince stayed put. Then they regarded one another, the prince stretched out his arms and laid them on the old man's shoulders. Tenderly his face approached the old man's wizened face.

The puzzled riders below watched as the prince wept and wept on the old man's neck, how his knees trembled and the peasant let him slide slowly to the ground. At that moment the peasant motioned to the riders, beckoned them. Hadad Djori was to be carried to the nearby toolshed. Then they learned: he is Simri, once a famous singer, the prince's friend.

Not far from the vineyard, an hour's ride, were some ancient castle-like walls inhabited by locals. Hadad Djori took himself off to this place. He would not leave his friend. They stayed until the onset of winter, and conversed.

*

Hadad Djori, the prince: "You do not want to dwell in the city, in my entourage. I understand. You were besieged by too many people. People asked too much of you. I granted you leave of absence. You'd already had one long absence, but you came back, and I never reproached you. You are a free man. We've been friends since childhood, and if you are seized by a wanderlust and would be happy to go travelling, then go."

Simri: "What do you mean?"

Prince: "You know. All can be done in friendship. When you came back last time, I questioned you and you answered, and you spoke of moods. I was happy to have you back. But now you have entirely kept away. You were missing from me, and I had to go in search of you, and now I've found you."

Simri: "May I answer in my own way? I have no lute here, but may I sing, a suggestion of a song?"

Prince: "So long as you answer."

Simri: "A swallow lost her way, a swallow flew in circles and could not find her nest. Why did she not turn her head? Why did she not descend and listen for the chirping of her young ones in the nest? Always in circles and then higher and again in circles. Had she lost her memory? Did she want to go back, what did she want, did she want anything? The swallow flew, soared high and swooped in circles. She circled through the air like a screw, whirled and bobbed. She dived, turned, climbed again."

Hadad Djori: "And then?"

Simri: "Nothing."

Prince: "May I say what I wish to say?"

Simri: "My prince."

Hadad Djori: "Here I am, face to face with you. I had to ride all this way to the frontier to find you, and when I ask why you slipped away from me, you answer: I'm flying, I'm flying."

Simri: "And you, why don't you do the same? I rode alone on the highway. Across mountains. I rode until I came to a region where no one had heard of me. I wore different clothes, I wanted no more songs. Only later did it occur to me that I bore no one a grudge for my situation."

Hadad Djori: "Which was ...?"

Simri: "I was growing old, ever older. I had grown old. I was fleeing from old age, my prince. Red is red and blue is blue, but only now. The sun shines on my roof, through my window, but

only now. Delightful how the Moon casts its light upon clouds, delightful the moonlight on my bed, but already it is gone, already it has turned away, where is the light, the glow, where is the delight? You young lady, you rejoice over silver dancing shoes, and you wear a princess' train borne by four ladies, two to right, two to left, how you rejoice in the morning, your delight at evening, your memories. What is that? A blazing torch in the night, it goes out, the blink of a glow-worm in a dark forest, on a tree trunk."

Hadad Djori: "We know, everything is transient."

Simri: "Knowing is not enough. It's just a word: people say it and don't know it. Only slowly does knowledge come."

*

Hadid Djori rode away. Simri had promised to keep him informed of his whereabouts.

Greetings, strange man

Aetheria: "Greetings, stranger. I see you day after day. You sit alone, sad, not moving. When it grows dark you get to your feet and go slowly on your way up to the cypresses, on the arm of your servant."

Simri says nothing.

Aetheria: "Greetings, stranger. I see you day after day, and now stand before you. I'm told I must not stand mute before you and stare at you as if at a picture. I am to speak to you."

Simri says nothing.

Aetheria: "I never tried to speak to you, because you're a nobleman and I'm a simple woman. I come from Portosa near Salerno and I'm on a pilgrimage. And they've told me I mustn't approach you without saying something."

Simri says nothing.

Aetheria: "I asked the one who told me to speak to you: what should I say? He said that as soon as I stand here I shall know. But I don't know."

Simri: "Pilgrim, I am no Christian."

Aetheria: "Greetings, stranger. I'm glad you can hear me. You are sad, and suffer – like me. That's why I was uneasy, and wanted to pass you by. But I am to stand face to face with you, that's what they told me. I shall know what I have to say once I stand here."

Simri: "Pilgrim whom I do not know and who does not know me: who was it who told you to speak to me?"

Aetheria: "I'm glad you can hear me. I don't know him, either by name or anything else. I've never seen him with my own eyes. He's one of the Invisibles."

Simri: "Come closer, pilgrim. My eyes are weak, and I should like to study your face. Closer now. Sit with me. I should like to know who you are, coming so close and telling such curious stories."

Aetheria: "I'm the pilgrim Aetheria. I come from Portosa near Salerno. I'm on a pilgrimage."

Simri: "Pilgrim Aetheria, I am no Christian."

Aetheria: "The one who told me to speak with you never told me your name, or what gods you pray to. But he commanded me never to pass you by."

Simri: "He's one of the Invisibles, you say."

Aetheria: "Yes."

Simri: "My name is Simri, young pilgrim. I spent my life in the palace of Prince Hadad Djori. I have travelled all across Syria and even down to Egypt. I never came across an Invisible."

Aetheria: "Maybe you just never noticed. He'll have seen you. He pointed you out to me."

Simri: "If he has no form and you cannot see him, how does he make himself known?"

Aetheria: "He speaks. He appears in all sorts of ways. He goes past when you least expect it, and lets a word drop and then another word, and only after you've pondered the words do you realise: that was him."

Simri: "Speak closer into my ear, young pilgrim. I cannot move without pain. Place your hand in my hand, so that I can feel you when you speak."

Aetheria: "Your hand is freezing, noble Simri. Let me take it in both my hands."

Simri: "Now you hold my hand and warm it. It does me good. Now look, young pilgrim: the Invisible who directed you here has revealed a truth to you. He promised that you would know what to say once you were face to face with me. The words your hands speak are clever and convincing. I should like to hear more from them."

Aetheria: "Well then, noble Simri, give me your other hand."

Simri: "What gifts you bestow. Now tell me in words, wonderful Christian. This Invisible you consort with, the one who has seen me and yet I've never come across him, what did he tell you about me?"

Aetheria: "Oh, don't say you don't know him! He's seen you and you've encountered him, him and others – there are lots. They appear in many guises, they make themselves noticed in many ways. I've known them since I was a child. But I had no idea of their powers."

Simri: "The Invisible you speak of knows much and can do much. He knew you'd be able to speak to me. Yes, he knows about me. Young pilgrim, what message do you bring? Going about the region and talking of your Invisible. Is he a god? The god the Christians believe in?"

Aetheria: "He's been talking to me since I was a child. Sometimes in words, sometimes without words. He fusses about me in all sorts of ways, never lets go of me, never goes from me ... He's not God, but someone sent by God."

Simri: "He knows a little about me. He must say it to my face. I have to know it. What does he know? I am unsettled by this. Do not leave me, pilgrim woman, before you reveal to me who he is, this one who knows about me, so that I may learn from him more about myself and my life. For I am someone, after all. I *exist*, after all."

Aetheria: "What do you mean, noble Simri? Here you sit in front of me. You exist, you're not dreaming."

Simri: "Pilgrim, I am not dreaming. I would like to get to know this Invisible, this one who has seen me, so that he can tell me what he knows of me."

Aetheria: "Noble Simri, of course you existed before, in your former life, of course you were there."

Simri drew his hand back. He gave her fingers a squeeze, and his stiffened lips tried to smile. "Help me. It seems you can do this. Yes, I existed, and I thought: I am. I thought: I am Simri, and nobody you might ask in my home town would dispute that Simri existed. Back there you can hear my songs. There'll tell you how I lived in the prince's palace. He was my friend, he still is, he searched for me, every month he sent messages asking me to return. But I don't want to go back there, to the place from which I came and where my poems and songs are still alive. All that was, like myself, in the process of melting away, and still is. And because it melts away it was not real, and is not. ... You stare so, pilgrim. What has shocked you?"

Aetheria: "Back in your own land, were you a human being like the rest of us? Did a wife, a mistress, a beloved live with you?"

Simri: "I was Simri the minstrel. Back in my own land they can tell you of me. Sometimes women lived with me."

Aetheria: "You loved, and it was nothing?"

Simri: "The moment was fulfilled, it was so full that I sang of it, how there could be nothing more true, more genuine."

Aetheria: "Oh so true, noble Simri."

Simri: "How your eyes gleam, pilgrim woman. You too have loved. You were not always a pilgrim."

Aetheria: "How can you complain that it was nothing, you were nothing? Why would you dismiss your love, and yet you know what it was."

Simri: "When I hear your voice and see your eyes and how your lips pout with longing, I recall how blessed I felt to have such love. Pilgrim, you have awakened in me how it all was, all that I called Life and Being. Across our land came soothsayers and prophets, who implored us to renounce love, pleasures, deceptions of every kind. But why? Pour away the cup when you are thirsty? I knew only that my thoughts, my songs praised the abundance of joy. What I turned into song was women, beauty and love. For every one of us, Heaven has strewn our path with blessings. I wandered tirelessly along those paths, as far as my feet would carry me. Pilgrim, there are men and women who drink and smoke and must always be intoxicated. I was an addict, always thirsting for more pleasures, love and beauty. Oh, I never want to renounce them. You have found the same, Aetheria, you are radiant. How you stretch yourself, you are changing. There is much in you that is yet to blossom."

Aetheria: "I have known love. I've never forgotten. Ever since I lost it I'm an empty husk."

Simri: "Pilgrim, my sister, my young sister. How to thank the Invisible that sent you to me?"

Aetheria: "He didn't send me here to talk about my loves. He said I had to talk. I don't think he's enjoying this. But he can't stop me from talking the way I do. Oh, it does me so much good to talk to you, to someone who can share my feelings."

Simri: "Sister, did you bless your love, your pleasures, the joy?"

Aetheria: "Yes, yes and yes."

Simri: "And you bless them still? But then you became a pilgrim."

Aetheria: "Because I was robbed of my love, because it was not granted me."

Simri: "Who ...?"

Aetheria: "The same one, the one that sent me to you."

Simri: "No."

Aetheria: "You think he's not cruel. What do you think? We are the game, God the hunter."

Simri: "You want to help me, but you yourself are suffering."

Aetheria: "You will understand me. Oh, I'm so happy, noble Simri, that I've found you and can talk with you. The Invisible granted me at least this much."

Simri: "I am unsettled. You have stood up. You're about to leave."

Aetheria: "For now."

I cannot see her, I am waiting for her

Simri: She was here, some days ago. I cannot see her. I am waiting for her.

It is evening. The afternoon has gone by. I shall not forget these hours. Even though they are bygone, even though they can never return, dark and heavy, dead and enveloped in decay. It is not over, yet.

I sit, I lie, overcome with pains, my hands, heavy and thick, are open. They radiate pain. Empty word: pain. Thorns outside and tensions within, as if about to explode. It trickles from the shoulders, up from the neck, at the back of the neck is a fountain of torment, a never-ending shower. How heavy my legs are. I lift them, they are heavy as a pump handle. And when I put my feet on the ground they are like wax, the soles squeak but I cannot feel them. Once they were my feet, my legs. They have separated from me.

I sit and lie in fire. Fire from an oven. Once some people turned up in my town, they told of pious youths, I am not one of them.

I sit, I lie; no end to the pain. And I'm surrounded by such a terribly happy, green, warm, joy-brimming world. Sunlight on the curtain in my room. A table before me, and chairs. Flowers on the table; sweet music wafts in. But as if I have died already, I cannot grasp the melody. I lie in a cave and am paralysed and nobody comes to my aid, and nothing helps. And I cannot reach my self. And I think: there must be something that can help and save. But I cannot even lift my arms to pray. I'm paralysed inside and out, I have been stolen from me.

I lie here and burn. Outside is the deceiving green of trees. How falsely the leaves play on the breeze. If only I were already burned, ashes to ashes.

*

Now the bad hour has passed. It came to an end at last. Fire trickles still over my arms. But inside I feel nothing now, it's exhausted, has given up. It has also yielded some of its torpor.

No sunlight now on my curtain. The room is darkening. Things come at me. At least things still accept me. We look at one another. Maybe they're in the same way. And I am only a thing.

The battle is over. I was able to pray and give thanks, to whomever.

*

Simri: "I was waiting for you, pilgrim. Thank you for not forgetting me."

Aetheria: "You keep your eyes closed. Are you weary?"

Simri: "We spoke of the fever, of youth and joy and intoxication. You were robbed of your love. Now look at me. I've been robbed of everything. Let me tell you about myself.

"I must keep control of my heart, and not slide into the abyss. For I know now what it is that seeks to overpower me, Aetheria my sister. I know now at whose table it was I supped for all those decades. I felt contentment, and went about brisk and upright. I did what I wanted. That was the sap and the blood of my body, my solidity, my strength. They're in ruins now, the solidity and the strength. I enjoyed them and never thought to pass them off as my self and take pride in them. When they brought forth something beautiful and praiseworthy I never hesitated to place myself to the fore, and sing my own praises.

"At this table where I had my place, and it was always, in some puzzling taken-for-granted manner, so wonderfully laden that I sat and felt contentment. I never thought it would end. An ending never entered my head.

"Now the servants no longer set my place at the table. Now in the evenings I lay down as always on my cot and draw a blanket over me. I sleep and in the morning I arise. But the body I clothe every morning is not the one that moved about earlier, of which I believed myself the mover. I can still remember that body, and know how easily and without strain the muscles obeyed my will and my joints flexed. I was able to command them and they did everything I wanted. They were swift as my thoughts. Now – another body has been inflicted on me. I must clothe a carcase I do not recognise. I must move about in a different carcase.

"When I look in a mirror and have doubts, lo, it is still my face, and I recognise it and can laugh at myself. But it's merely an illusion, the face deceives, within me all is changed. This house has been stripped bare, a new owner has moved in, and behind my back has installed all his own things. It is old age.

"In youth I wanted to live, and felt all was well with me, and said: this is me. I accepted this youth and this adulthood and deceived myself when I thought I saw myself reflected in them. In heaviness, in weariness, in pain, in my sombre grief I must now see myself mirrored.

"I want to be master of my heart, and not slide into the abyss.

"These two things are you: ripeness, and old age. Now open your eyes – you too, sister Aetheria, and learn what you have lost. Was it you who became lost? You have said yes to the beginning and the middle. Now you must say yes to the end."

Aetheria: "What awful things you say, Simri."

Simri: "Let me speak truth, insofar as I know it. Let me complain. I am a nation that has been conquered. There is no justice, no law. Barbarians march in, ride in whenever they want. They do with me what they will. I am their prey.

“If I move, if I stand up, if I am resolute, sometimes there’s a change. For a while they leave the ground clear, but they always return.

“I have to remove myself from my body, remove myself from the whole world, in order to pull myself together. For what do I pine? For what do I pine? To take myself off to where my life is. How should I draw near to it? I have thoughts; but they are thoughts, what can they achieve? They come and go. Where do they come from? Can I trust them? And my will, my feelings, are they anything other than smoke from a fire within me? What sort of fire? Can I entrust myself to them? My body, oh, this structure so wonderfully built and designed – what has happened to it? Give it a couple of sips: they intoxicate, already a heaven arches over its head, its feet become lighter, it grows tipsy, we are drunk, I have to sing. My will, my thoughts, my feelings – what are they?

“Whom should I trust, to whom should I entrust myself, so that I can become what I must be: the flame that rises straight up to Life, to Truth? I must go in search of myself, and withdraw from all the world.

“Oh, Aetheria, everything decays. Whatever is filled with glory, it all decays. Down at the foot of this hill is a little house and behind it, up the slope, is a hut. Sunlight falls bright on the hill. The house and the hut for a while have a ruddy glow. For a while they stand in the light, which then pales. The sunlight fades. The green hills grow dark. The sky still holds some blue, white clouds reflect light.

“But this happens with everything in the world, with me too. When I think, when I feel, and how I think and feel – what sun’s rays are passing over me? A torment to think that I do not live, but – am lived.

“I sat in my room there, Aetheria, and looked out of the window. A youngish woman was in the garden, bending over a child. When she straightened up, I saw lines in her healthy face.

“You know nothing of yourself, you fade. You care for the child. And soon it will as big as you, a child will stand there and your back will be bent. Lines appear in the face. Everything drains away so fast, in only a moment. And what is it that calls itself Life? Enough to make you weep. What is it meant to be, what does it want? Bright happy days, a myriad green leaves emerge from shrubs and bushes, and drink in air and sunlight. At first all was frozen and black. Now it plays in light. Shapes emerge all at once from these growing things. There’s no stopping, it’s begun and must run its course. And at the same times birds are there, they live off the greenery. Worms crawl about and nibble at roots. To think what must be mobilised to implement all this, what was initiated by the showers of rain this week. For a while it is to blaze out, and then turn brown and fragile. And Earth covers herself in dead leaves. That’s how it goes, how it blazes, and that is life, and is what it is, filled with grief and lamenting, with pleasures and yearning.”

As noble Simri lamented old age, the pilgrim Aetheria listened closely: “You talk so strangely, noble Simri. You lament, and then provide your own response. We grow old, and older, and at last we die. That’s nature, it’s our fate and the fate of every plant, every creature.”

Simri: “I lament this fate. I suffer under the fate of humankind.”

Aetheria: “Your suffering, noble Simri, troubles me, and I should like to help you. I know about herbs, and shall look for some. But I cannot understand why you lament our human fate.

It only makes your pain worse. It will abate if you just accept it. It will grow milder, like a dog that growls and bites when you annoy it, but then lies down when you say a kind word and show it a bone. Oh, we are not eternal, noble Simri, we grow old and have to die.”

Simri: “This I lament.”

Aetheria: “Who wants to live forever? We do our work, but gradually our hands lose their skill. How can anyone lament this, instead of praising the years when we could live and work.”

Simri: “I lament this. How humiliating, to be a human.”

Aetheria: “Back in my country we lived by the sea. A cliff soared up from the water, jagged and hard. If a boat hit the cliff, the hull would be holed. The boat would sink. That’s how hard and strong the cliff is. But if you look out over the water, you see other cliffs nearby. They don’t soar so high, they’ve already lost, some are crumbling. Water and sun work away at them, the action of waves and heat gradually wears the cliff away. And at last all you need is a little nudge with an oar to knock them over. That’s how it goes with rocky cliffs, noble Simri.”

Simri: “I am not a cliff, I am Simri. I feel the shame of being human, that I have to grow old to feel this shame. Woe on our pride, our glory. All that our songs sing about heroes. Weep, tear ourselves apart, go hide – that’s what we should do.”

Simri said no more. He laid his brow against a pillar and groaned. He ignored Aetheria. A servant came, put an arm around Simri’s shoulder, led him into the house.

Aetheria stayed, sat all alone.

To be human: what a humiliation. Weep, tear oneself apart, hide away. For this I had to approach him, and talk with him. Simri is my mirror. Yes, we are mocked. The fate of humankind – I had never seen it like that.

Aetheria’s response

Simri: “You regard me so gravely, pilgrim Aetheria.”

Aetheria: “Yes. You are my brother, you suffer and won’t accept advice. You refuse to submit to what is inflicted on you. And the more I listen to you, it becomes ever more clear that you speak well. I had already grown weak, but your words have strengthened me. See how mischievously they toy with us. Look, noble Simri, here we are by the roadside; here am I, and I was robbed of my life’s sweetness and told I must be happy; and there you are, you were granted a life and now they present you with the bill. Justice, noble Simri, justice.”

Simri: “Love and pleasure are showered on us, we dance, merry and carefree. All is deception and lies. Behind it lurks old age and pain, infirmity, sickness.”

Aetheria: “Oh brother Simri, what have they done to you, and what to me, in the name of justice. Ah, to think I was about to kiss those hands of iron.”

Simri: “Look at me. I lie at the end of a road that you must take. Don’t complain if at the very start you are summoned back. But tell me, who is this unknown personage, this Invisible, I’ve asked you time and again, Aetheria: the one who speaks to you and stalks you in so many guises? It is he who led you to me. He has seen me. I have to withdraw from the world, and that is why I must know what he knows, and what he wants. Oh, don’t be sore, Aetheria. I’d

like to hear from him. Anyone as sick as I am will try any medicine. Say: how did you first meet him? And what has he done to you?"

Aetheria: "I've been stalked by him a hundred times. I know who he is. He won't help us, he's not on our side."

Simri: "Sweet Aetheria, let us call out together for him to explain himself, to me as well. If someone is putting us on trial, there's no trial if the other side may not speak."

Aetheira: "So you want to question him. He'll be glad to have you come and complain, it'll make his day. That's his way, and the way of the one who sends him. Look at me. He, and the one who sent him, have made of me, of a woman who used to live in bliss and love, what you see before you now, on this road. He noticed me once, saw my joy, and swooped like a falcon. Why? What had I done? Am I some animal, to become his prey? I was happy, but I wasn't allowed to be happy. And if you're young, you have to grow old. And if you're healthy and stride along, you'll grow lame and fall apart. He heard me laugh and sing. He saw I was in love, and who I was in love with, who was my all, my very self, my heart, my god. He couldn't, wouldn't let it go on. You can have no god but him, you are to love only him, the jealous, wicked one. And because he's almighty – and truly he is, I found that out myself – he can destroy and raise up at his own whim. He can cast you down into any misery he likes. And Simri, he's so mighty, so almighty, so supreme, he can say that whatever he does is right."

Aetheria paused. But she continued: "That's why *he* threw the one I loved to the ground, like a stone idol, and let him die. One morning, still full of love, he went from me to where I can't reach him any more. That's *his* doing, it proved his dominion over us. Once he'd done that, and I still didn't realise who had done it, I prayed to him all unsuspecting to give me the strength to avenge the dead man, the murdered man. At the very least I wanted to scatter the murderer's blood on his grave. And it was Valerio who gave me the dagger. Simri, I couldn't."

Simri: "Why?"

Aetheria: "He took away my strength. *He* can do anything. He's almighty. I'd gone off to Rome to find the murderer and kill him. *He* wouldn't allow it."

Simri: "Who?"

Aetheria: "The god behind the Invisible, the almighty god. Simri, he gave my husband to me, and he took him away."

She broke out onto sobs, kicked with her legs. Quickly removed her hands from her face.

Aetheria: "And now I'm supposed to say: 'The name of the Lord be praised'. The name of him who robbed us of happiness. Won't do it – to the very end of my days I won't do it. Because *he* knows this, he's set his emissary the Invisible at my heels. Like the Furies going after criminals, he hunts me down. I'm a fugitive from god, brother Simri. I hide away and beat about me, I've already done so much to save myself. He won't leave me alone. Oh, brother Simri, everything in me is shattered. Send me away now, my good Simri."

She ran head over heels down the road.

Simri: "There's still something magical about her coming to me. Magic in her seeing me and standing before me. A mystery that told her to speak to me, she the young pilgrim woman, to an old sick man in the land of Syria. I cannot rest until I have found out what this is."

“She brought a wicker basket to my house; I circle around it and want to open it. I tremble inwardly, but am not afraid. She has already done me good, but she doesn’t know it. It goes beyond her. Wonderful vessel, this pilgrim woman, this simple young person. I miss her. I long to see her and receive her tidings.”

Blessings, Aetheria!

For days Aetheria’s hackles were up; then she had to rouse herself and go back to Simri.

He saw her approach. In his joy he thought to walk towards her – and was able to do so!

“Why clutch your breast, sister Aetheria? Because I come to greet you? But I’ve been waiting, day after day.”

“You’re walking towards me. You can walk, you don’t need your servant’s help.”

“Are you shocked? And you slump onto the bench. What is it, my sister?”

“Nothing, noble Simri, nothing.”

She sat up straight and stared at him. “You see what he’s capable of.”

Simri: ‘What you’re capable of.’

Aetheria: “No.”

Simri: “And this is why you clap hands to your face? Why, dear sister? When I feel so much better. You’re mumbling, I can’t make out what you’re saying.”

Aetheria: “You see how powerful he is.”

Simri: “I bless the hour, sister Aetheria, when you found me and stepped into my pavilion and said: Greetings, noble Simri! I bless too the one who sent you, whether visible or invisible.”

Part 4: Defeat and Victory

Triumph

“I sit down beside you, sister, and if you would grant me this favour, tell me at last more about him and what he has done to you. You say the Invisible took away your beloved husband and would not let you take revenge on the murderer. Indeed, he commanded you to love the one who took your husband.”

Aetheria: “As if I were a slave, a wretched despicable nonentity.”

Simri: “But if he is good, this mighty one?”

Aetheria: “Oh.”

And now she began to tell him and show him all that had happened to her and all she had had to endure from the Invisible who would not let her get away.

But Simri sat at her side, and the sense of joy came again over him, and as if under a spell he felt more relaxed and free of pain. And when she paused in her tale, he felt for her hand and implored her to be calm and not slander the Invisible, no, she must not slander him, she misjudges him, does him injustice.

Taken aback, she fell silent. He asked her to listen to him. As she sat there stiff and mute, he begged and insisted that she open her eyes, and soften her heart.

This he said quietly, and it flashed into her like lightning. She stood up and moved away. Her back pressed against the wall, she was shaking, staring at Simri as if at a ghost. Then she uttered little panicked cries and fled to the pavilion. He followed her slowly with sad pleading words. She hid her face in an arm. He heard her whisper: Stay, Simri, don't go away, I'm afraid, afraid for you too. Now he's out to grab you. You don't know it. You don't notice. Oh my dear friend Simri, if only you knew him. You think it's you speaking, but he puts words in your mouth. That's his secret style. He does it in such a way we never realise he's ordering us about and making us obey unresisting. Oh, I've known him through and through, since years ago. He can't fool me any more. I can be soft or hard, whatever he likes. Oh, listen to me. Come, Simri, come. Be careful. Take my advice, pull free, my brother, my friend.

Simri came. She took him by the hands and pulled him close. She laid her cheek against his. A salt tear trickled from her eye to his lips. But once again he was overtaken by an ineffable sense of joy. She moved her head and turned her eyes on him. He had a look of bliss.

She let go: so the Invisible has laid hands on him. So this is what the Invisible, my adversary, arranged, what he was after when he made her run from Simri.

Then her knees gave way.

She swayed. Everything collapsed in on her. Facing her was a human being in the flesh – what has happened to him – it is her doing. He is changed. He was unable to move, he suffered horribly, complained all the time, wanted to slide into the abyss.

And now something's happened to him, it's her doing, hers, pitiful Aetheria from Portosa. She stared in disbelief. She couldn't bear it. She had to leave.

But that afternoon she returned. She wanted confirmation. She must be mistaken. Surely he'll be complaining again.

But the horror – there he stood by the pavilion, in the light, and came to meet her, standing tall, his face calm and joyful.

She couldn't accept this. It could not be. She came to a stop, clapped hands to her face, she did not want to see that smile. He had to hold her up. She pulled her hands away. Oh that she had allowed herself to speak to him, against her will. Falling into this trap. He was shocked by her menacing glare. He asked why she was angry. She confronted him, arms crossed: "You're in league. You've betrayed me."

His shoulders lifted in puzzlement. He forced her to stay. Once she was seated she whimpered: "Now you see for yourself, Simri, what I've gone through. I can do nothing. I am nothing. He's all-powerful. He's the only one with power. I am nothing. Aetheria is nothing. Aetheria is a dog. There is no Aetheria."

To his horror she kept repeating this. And then she roused herself, ripped her gown at the breast, pulled at her hair. He couldn't restrain her. He wrestled with her. She overturned the bench. Her face was closed, she ground her teeth. The words she uttered were confused, unclear. Now he heard: "Simri, you don't know what I've done. You'd better know who you're dealing with here. I am cursed. I am Satan."

Now came a wild flood of speech. She would not look at him as she spoke of Bethlehem, how she had gone to the priest there and accused herself, she'd had to accuse herself because she was evil, she was possessed by the Devil. And the one she'd caused to be whipped, that wasn't the Devil. All the while the priest was having her whipped, she'd borne it with pleasure, because the victim was actually no devil.

"The devil was – me."

She stabbed fingers into her eyes. She threw herself down. She raged. Simri summoned his servant to help. He never left her side. He had her brought into the house. She'd better stay here, I'm afraid she'll do herself harm.

She threw herself onto the cot, groaned, screamed and cursed herself. Simri had a woman come and tend to her. She kept it up for three nights and three days. She clenched her teeth and let not a crumb pass her lips.

Simri was the pained spectator of this lamentable performance. He saw her honest face, now grey and twisted, her dreadfully dull and bloodshot eyes.

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Three days and three nights she raged against herself. Then she fell asleep. At first she groaned. Then for long hours she slept the sleep of the dead, well into bright day. Late one afternoon she sat up unaided and began to sing in a resounding voice, clear and enthusiastic. She praised and adored in the words of the Psalms the one eternal almighty all bountiful Creator of the world, the father of humankind.

Simri in his pavilion heard the singing. He came in and sat by her. She brooked no interruption to her song of praise. At last she rose from the cot, knelt, bowed her back, touched her forehead to the floor, and in heartrending words, sobbing, begged God to be

merciful and forgive her terrible sins, remove from her this burden of sin. Time after time she cried sobbing: “You’ll do it, you’ll do it, you’ll do it, I am a sinner.”

She said: “I know you’ll do it.” The phrase had come to her as she slept, in a dream. A sinner who repents is worth more than a hundred righteous people.

Her singing and talking gradually grew incoherent. Incomprehensible words came from her mouth. They were mere cries and a mishmash of repeated syllables. She grew increasingly agitated. She was in a frenzy.

Up till now she had knelt and then stood up, hands raised above her head, rocking her upper body back and forth. Now her bare feet shuffled strangely forward, one before the other, she made little dancing steps, swayed from the hips, and now began to twirl about herself.

Several men and women had come running from their homes at the sound of her singing. They stood silently by the wall, watched and listened. Now Aetheria looked at them as she tripped by, stretched arms out to them and drew them in. They came one after the other, followed her movements, and lifted up their voices. They circled hand in hand with Aetheria.

Noble Simri stood entranced. And now Aetheria right beside him, singing: “Where are you? Where has my brother Simri got to?”

She grabbed him and pulled him close. He took two steps, two very slow constrained steps. She flung both arms around his chest, and he had no idea what she was up to. But his mouth opened to sing along with Aetheria. This was the first time in years that the great Syrian singer had sung, he whose songs, merry or lamenting, resounded in every street and lane. Now he sang a new unfamiliar song. For a long time he had not heard his voice, he thought it was ruined. But it emerged from his chest like one returned from the dead, who pushes up the coffin lid and in amazement sucks in big breaths. As Simri’s mouth opened, his feet grew lighter, his legs no longer dragged at him, they flexed and stretched at the joints. In Aetheria’s embrace this rigid mass came to itself, loosened up and became lively – gained new life. Aetheria, eyes radiant as the sun, spun around with him. His deep full masculine voice rumbled beneath the high jubilant voice of the woman.

They let go of one another, the men and the women, then fell into each other’s arms. How blissfully Aetheria gazed about her and sighed. Her voice was calm and tender. She was back from a long journey.

Then she sat down.

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The dance in noble Simri’s pavilion was attended by heavenly angels. No one down below had noticed them. Heavenly music had not reached the ears of the dancing couples.

While Aetheria knelt and endlessly sang God’s praises and thanked Him – for she was defeated and admitted defeat – she had to lay down her arms and was able to lay down her arms, she had to turn herself in to God’s custody and was pardoned – and while she tripped about with little steps and span around and uttered incomprehensible words, in her words and her singing were mingled jubilant angel-cries, and she tried to make them out and incorporate them in her human utterances.

The angels crowed, and thought of the words spoken by their Lord and King – whose name is the most blissful of all names – about a woman, a poor woman, who had ten drachmas and lost one, and went searching until she found the lost coin. And she called friends and neighbours together and said: “Rejoice with me, for I have found the drachma that I lost.” And the angels knew also of the man who had a hundred sheep, but he lost one and abandoned the ninety-nine in the meadow to go after and find the one lost sheep, and how he never stopped searching until he found Aetheria, the woman from Portosa. “Rejoice,” he cried, “for I have found my lost sheep.” And as Aetheria began to move and turn with Simri in his pavilion, as his joints lost their stiffness, his muscles relaxed and an old, young, triumphant voice emerged from his chest – then they rejoiced, those angels who restored strength to his limbs and loosened his bonds.

At last the jubilant angels had managed to come near to Aetheria, and take up a place in her soul. And at their urging the little star had climbed from the well. Aetheria was the first to spot him, and that is why she began to move about the floor and spin around and gladly follow the star’s bobbing.

Simri’s Song

Simri, embraced and led by Aetheria, sang:

Noble Simri sang, at Aetheria’s breast.
Her breath wafted about the face of this man –
Hadad Djori’s friend from childhood –
He sang as Aetheria held him up,
Aetheria, the woman from Italy,
A young woman come over from Italy
With pilgrims of the Christian faith,
With a horde of refugees, fleeing from barbarians.

Simri sang:

If I have lived this moment,
If this moment has come to me, to dead Simri,
Who dying fled from Hadad Djori’s palace,
And had to leave behind his dear lord and protector,
Then I am not Simri,
I have not stepped foot in another land,
In another existence;
For in this existence my limbs no longer moved,
And in this one I was racked by aches and pains
That showed to me
That I lay on the spit where lies the sacrificial beast.
I had stepped into another existence,
That I had not expected
And not imagined,
And not made into poetry.
Never once dreamed of,

Was never even able to conceive in dream,
Of which our Ancients too had never spoken,
For I had learned all of what they said,
But this lay hidden from them
And so was never handed down.

For a great wall extends across this land,
It plunges steep towards the East
And sinks towards the West
And nestles down on the Euphrates.
With hills and meadows and mountains
Like a woman in big loose baggy garments
At the feast.
Smooth and wide the river flows on by
On which I was so often borne
In my lord Hadad Djori's boat.

But on those mountains, where they soar up highest,
On a mountain radiant Baalbek stood,
Baalbek, temple city, which enchanted me,
Temple city, rubble now, where I learned and taught
And where I was fed and formed
And where the one called Simri gained his education,
Where Simri grew up, nourished on the milk of gods,
As he moved through the gardens and fields
And rode in boats on the Leontes
In the region of the holy temple he never forsook,
And never trembled in awe
At the holy region of the Temple of Baalbek
When from afar he glimpsed the walls and ruins of Baalbek,
The silent groves –
What had they bestowed on me,
And Thou, Baal, burning in the sky,
Sun God,
Ashteroth, stern and chaste,
Ashera, for whom young maidens give themselves beneath poplars,
Adonis, who blesses and forsakes us,
I prayed to you all and worshipped,
Even when I dwelt in princely halls,
And sang frivolous songs that my people never forgot.
And the cruel Fire God, Moloch too, I venerated,
The one who delights in human death-cries,
He who chews us up in his hot jaws.
His might is great, so great.

But now I can no longer worship you, Great Gods,
And I beg you to release me from your service.
For one greater, mightier than you, summoned me

When sufferings and old age came with their oppression,
When I was parched and withering.

You gods of Baalbek,
I must go to where my heart and my learning lead me.
You all are mighty, but there is one mightier still.
I beseeched you all to help me.
You were unable to stand by me.
Oh, what was I to you,
What value had my prayers and pleas.
I came into this foreign land; you all saw me.
You let me wander on, left me lying in this pavilion,
In sultry air, in haze and mist, and in sandstorms.
Either you could not see me,
Or you were feasting on my suffering.

And then this foreigner Aetheria came,
And then she came to me,
Fleeing from her god
Who for love of her would not let her go.
Pursued by her god she tried to escape,
Tried to hide away from him.
But he sees everything, and he tracked her down,
My helper Aetheria, who became my saviour
At the moment when he tracked her down.
He tracked her down,
And I was the spear he cast at her.

For how did he bag his prey?
Not as the hunter stalks the deer,
So he can haul it back to his domestic hearth
And make a meal for his wife and all his children.
He did not kill her, and then gobble her up.

What did he do to bag her, this God of all gods?
He saw me in my pavilion,
This man who crawled here from a foreign land.
He saw where pain and suffering prevailed.
And I was the spear he cast at her.
And yet he did not make a spear of me,
Did not turn me into wood.

To bag his prey, to bag Aetheria,
He took this wretched man, this abandoned creature,
That she might heal him, and be healed herself.
In so doing he honoured me. He pulled me free
Out of the crowd of Moloch-worshippers,
I who sang of Baal, a friend of Astaroth, of Adonis,
In order that I grasp the poverty of my life.

She he took in his embrace: Aetheria,
Kissed her, raised her up,
And now
She dances
And I lie on her breast, her breath wafts over me,
He won't have me burned in sacrifice,
See now, gods of my homeland,
How He wakens me and enriches me.

I feel no pain,
I bend my knees,
I lift my arms,
I no longer stumble, no longer sway.
I walk on my own two feet,
And my throat has opened wide
To sing praises to this Divinity,
The true Divinity,
The Invisible,
The True,
The only One.

Aetheria's report

Once again, in the middle of a conversation, Aetheria broke out into a dance of jubilation. Then the wildness dissipated.

She went about in solemn fervour, inwardly preoccupied. Simri kept her with him.

No voice spoke to her, the Invisible never announced himself. She sat quietly by the hearth and took comfort in the fire.

Oh, to think this could happen, that she had found this, that this was granted her. No memory of former days troubled her. The flower had bloomed. She gave no thought to buds or leaves, to stem, to roots. Was she actually still a plant, or a butterfly flitting above the flower?

She spoke of many things in a slow, searching way. Simri, recalled by her to life, sat at her feet, his life renewed, he quivered with excitement when she began to speak. Just look: here the poet learns of Dream and Truth, and how they find one another.

She pondered, reflected, and when she knew and tried to speak it out, it seemed not she who spoke, but like someone who reaches for a beaker, like a connoisseur who rolls the wine on his tongue in little sips. She listened to the words that she herself was speaking.

She never spoke of what she had experienced, but of thoughts and dreamlike distant things. She sat by Simri on her chair, grave, seeking the right words, waiting for the words that she would speak.

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Thoughts are like fields, said Aetheria. Lots of fields are left unploughed, untended. So plants grow all mixed together, only a few good ones are there. Everything's smothered in weeds.

Anyone poking around here must deal with thorns and nettles. It's the same with our thoughts. You'd like to speak out, but it's no use. You come up with empty false words and lies, nothing but lies and false words. They pretend to be good seed. You never arrive at truth.

Such remarks were woven through all Aetheria's conversations. She was constantly brought to a stop, struggled to arrive at the wonderful things pressing in on her.

One of her themes was the little star at Bethlehem. So many angels are sent down to people, countless angels, but nobody notices or pays attention. People mistake their presence and their intentions. God strews angels all over humankind. He knows why, and the angels know it: they are to further the work of the Saviour, our Lord.

Oh, she sighs, how high the weeds grow! Lies swarm like locusts across the world. Lies don't come into the world all by themselves. They could never persist so long if they weren't set up and directed by someone. They fill the air with their discordant clamour, so you can't hear anything else. And so people grow confused and unsure. Vanity, lechery and vengeance take root. So people become vain and covetous. So much sinning. So much viciousness. And the lie says: that's who you are, it has to be. Nothing else can be expected of human nature. Nothing else is granted to you, and so the world can never look different. And that's why people sometimes fall into despair, they run away from home and curse themselves and say: I'd rather go my own way, at the very least it is my way.

But where do all these weeds come from? They don't grow by themselves, the wind wafts them onto the field, and they drift in the air for as long as winds blow. Simri, there are devils among us. When not rampaging out there, they rampage within us. They can make us their instruments. They're shameless and mighty enough to look on the Earth as their abode, and treat us like domesticated beasts. We look at them and don't know who we're dealing with, just like dumb animals and the farmer. These devils take control of people and feed on them

Simri sat with her and tried to follow. She was sent to him as he sat among thorns and nettles, wasting his life away. Someone sits here who was obviously sent by Heaven, and so her name was not unknown to Heaven. Now he can hold the hand that once pulled back – a little lizard trying to slip away and hide beneath a stone. But I'm holding you, you'll stay with me, and her hand lay quietly in his and steered him towards Aetheria's thoughts.

Simri suggested that the world was no doubt a game played by God and Satan, and so amounted to nothing. "But tell me, Aetheria, why actually does God allow this, and why does he not keep the whole thing in check, as he does the details?"

Noble Simri thought Aetheria possessed some great knowledge, and held the key to all the world's mysteries. Aetheria pondered, her brow furrowed, and she said: "I don't know. And it's not good to ask this question, Simri. Why do you want to know what the Almighty wants? You don't even know the most trivial things, such as why the wind has changed direction since yesterday, why it blows stronger today than on previous days, why in one year the skies let so much rain fall that we have floods, and in another year we have droughts. You don't know why. And neither do you know what it means when we dream. And whatever you do understand is by no means all there is. Why do you want to know it all? Because you can't control the world by yourself. Do you mean to offer advice to God? To Him who created you in your body, on the Earth that he created? He asks us so many questions, and we never listen."

When Simri never stopped with his questioning, during these days when he was so excited and wide awake, she responded:

“If you want to find your place in the world, don’t start with the world, but with the heavenly Father. That he created us and our world is the beginning of all wisdom. Ask our good Father what you need to ask. You will know the answer.

“The angels in Heaven know us humans and tell us what we really need to know. Ever since God’s Son came down to us, the angels find nothing so enticing as us humans. Christ laid himself on the Cross and his blood flowed across all of Heaven – every angel carries a drop of his blood on its wings. Angels big and small try to follow in his footsteps, they do as Jesus did, in order to guide people – their brothers and sisters gone astray – back to the right path. Many are at work, Simri, believe me. They lay siege to humankind; but how can they approach people embedded in thorns and nettles? We’re stuck in a mineshaft, buried alive. For a while the miners have a little bit to eat and drink, they live and breathe and imagine it’ll last a while longer, and they no longer hear the rescuers knocking.

“Awaken, soul, bestir yourself. Stand up, give yourself a shake. Lament, liberate yourself.”

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At that time an emissary of the Syrian princeling Hadad Djori turned up, bearing gifts and a letter. Will Simri, his friend, please return. He, Hadad Djori, the prince, lies sick, will Simri please come.

“Go to him,” Aetheria advised when he couldn’t make up his mind. “Bring peace to him.”

Day after day Simri delayed his departure. For hours he sat by Aetheria in the pavilion where he had first encountered her, where the angels had first seen him, where he first spoke with her. See the fellow sitting there, he doesn’t move, see how sad he looks.

Simri sighed: “It’ll all start up again, the sadness, the lassitude, the pain.”

“Go, brother Simri, have no fear. You are no longer the Simri who sat and suffered and I had to approach and start talking to him.”

She hugged him. He dropped at her feet. She was horrified. But she had to lay her hand on his head and bless him. She pleaded: “What are you doing to me, good Simri. God forgive me.”

Then he said his farewells to everyone in the house. Aetheria had to give him a strip of her headcloth. He was able to mount up on a horse.

She waved as he rode away.

“What has happened to me,” he asked himself in amazement as he rode slowly along, with the servant alongside. “I’m under a spell. It’s not possible, not possible.” But the strip from Aetheria’s headcloth hung at his breast. He felt in his insides the heat that it gave off.

“I shall soon find new songs, truer and more lovely than before, my loveliest, most authentic songs.”

Where should I go?

Where should I go? Aetheria asked. What is to become of me?

She turned towards Jerusalem.

She drew near to this holy place. But when she made a stop at Emmaus, at the place to which the crucified Saviour, once the fetters of death were broken, brought his disciples and spoke to them until they recognised him, a fog descended on her. Her spirit was enveloped in fog; she could not get rid of it. It grew denser and darker, until she could no longer stand straight but sank down in open air. She fell into a deep sleep. Goats gathered about her, dogs ran up and barked. Shepherds lifted her up and carried her to their shack. They thought she must be dehydrated, and gave her water. She swallowed some, and woke up. Then they led her a little way along the road.

Oh, she said when they had walked for a while, I cannot live in this country. Can't you feel it? It's like no other land. My body dies here, my body cannot hold together here.

She walked on. The Holy Land. Women and mules again, meek, silent, expectant. Now Aetheria did not go among them in order to lead them. She walked alone. What is to become of me, where should I go? Palms, Tiberias, the Sea of Gennesaret. Women with infants by their tents, Shiloh, Kidron Valley.

Jerusalem, lofty city. Here I am again. Heathens have overrun your heritage. Lord, they have desecrated your holy places and made of Jerusalem a heap of rubble. All around Jerusalem blood has been spilled like water. See Jerusalem, see me: The Lord cast his eye on me. He gave me a reprieve. I was a sinner, but my heart changed. I bowed down, my heart turned, I no longer have a heart, I no longer want a heart.

Some pilgrim men and women recognised her. Their pitiable condition was a shock. But she was glad.

She saw stern Eusebius and attended devotions. He kept a sharp eye on her. She prayed and knelt calmly, no twitching, no speaking in tongues.

When glances from Aetheria and the great Elder crossed, she thought: I've made you complicit in my guilt. You had me whipped. I never betrayed to you who else it was you should be whipping. I was a criminal. But here I am, Eusebius, have no fear, I have not been damned as I deserved. You must draw no lesson from this, Eusebius. It's not your fault. I won't place this burden on you. If I found grace, all the more so did you.

The brain-fog lifted. Aetheria moved in a steady joyful calm. All things, people, places presented themselves as if for the first time. She accepted all she saw and encountered, as if tame beasts thronged about her looking for kind words and a gentle patting.

Thus did she wander with the pilgrims. Where to? To the coast. She was taken to Pausanias.

At last he had found her. She had changed, grown older, even her voice sounded different. But Pausanias recognised her instantly. And he had longed for her too fiercely to keep his composure when she approached and gazed at him. He broke down.

"Pausanias, my life," she consoled him, she hugged and kissed him, she wept, she did not hold back. "Pausanias, my beloved life." Oh that this too is granted me.

When he grew calmer she sat at his side, an arm on his shoulder. His breathing was steadier: "Is it all back where it was before, Aetheria, before we separated, or even better, a thousand times better?"

The refugee was his again. He told how he had searched, wandered far and wide – until a few days ago it became clear she was still in this country, on the way back to Italy, and would soon be lost to him. So he redoubled his efforts, rode this way and that, made enquiries at various ports. Kept an eye on several ships awaiting pilgrims, and now – here she is. He was restored, his old self. All as before, and even better! She made no reply, he expected none.

He clung to her. He pestered her. When she came to his lodging and was alone with him, she was repelled, horrified by the way he behaved, he the educated Greek. He embraced her, fell to his knees, talked, jabbered, he wept and laughed. He pressed her to him and called her every sweet name he could find. She had to fend him off until his frenzy abated.

Then she sat with him in a blend of fear and sorrow. Her cajoling words brought him to his senses. Every day she had to swear not to leave him. How she fascinated him, how he clung to her. He couldn't assure her often enough: I waited for you with longing.

Aetheria: "You are very much changed, my friend. What has happened to you? You're not so cheerful and free as once you were."

"After I parted from you, my beloved Aetheria, I couldn't settle down. Back then I imagined I was enriching you with the wisdom of my country. But it must have been like this: I emptied myself out before you like a sack, you went, and left me empty and confused. I had nothing left. How did it happen?"

She rubbed her brow. "It's not me, it wasn't me."

Pausanias: "Soon after you went, I felt unsure of myself, as if I'd been exposed. That was your doing. My beloved Aetheria. Love is so powerful. And the longer you stayed away, the greater my torment. At first I thought: I'm so consumed with blazing love for this lovely pilgrim woman, and that may be the case, and love can for sure rob us of our reason. But it didn't help. Who are you, lovely pilgrim, my beloved Aetheria, are you devil or goddess, what are you doing to me?"

She saw this ardent blissful terrible love, Valerio and me. Aetheria, the dear little plant. Yesterday you were a seed, today a stem with little leaves, soon buds will appear, flowers with their colour and scent, all in due course. You carry this in you. Don't take fright, don't fight against it, you are not alone. There's a lot looking down on you. You mustn't stay seed and root forever, nor even flower. The uncovering, unfolding! Like someone climbing from the bath. Like a swimmer emerging from the river. First the head with its breathing mouth is lifted to the air, then neck, shoulders, an arm break through the water's surface, shred the transparent sheet. The river won't let go of the swimmer yet. And now he's found his footing, no longer needs the water. His feet support him. He climbs ashore. The river is behind him.

Pausanias spoke: "Recently at the market I saw a teacher from this country. He told stories, and praised a great hero called Samson. Everyone knew of him: his strength lay in his hair, and when scissors got to work on his hair, his strength was gone. He had a wife. She was from another tribe. She wheedled the secret out of him, and one night she cut off all Samson's hair, her own husband. Then her relations and friends were able to bind him and blind him. You have taken away my strength, Aetheria. Oh, did I deserve this, because of you?"

"I never did anything to you, my friend. Don't accuse me, don't frighten me. It makes me so sad that I wasn't good for you."

Pausanias: "I just wanted to show you how it is. It didn't hit me all at once, but in the way a man at harvest-time goes slowly with his scythe, reaches far out to left and right, and mows and opens up a path. That's how it came over me, slowly."

Aetheria: "What kind of path?"

Pausanias: "What path? As soon as I met you, oh friend of my heart, beloved Aetheria, I had a feeling you should not skip across my path like a sweet joy. Something jangled and quaked inside me, right from the first time you put your hand in mine."

She clapped hands over her ears. "Pausanias, speak of something else."

Pausanias: "Why do you hold back, Aetheria. Are you not a woman? You have gone back to the Christian faith, I won't ask why. But are you any less of a woman for that? My Aetheria looks out on the world so strangely. What happened to you? Were you ill?"

"Nothing."

Pausanias: "If you can't answer, at least give me a kiss."

Now she inwardly praised God and commended her soul to him: Thou hast sent me this. Whatsoever Thou doest, whatever Thou hangest over me, I accept.

She closed her eyes, flung her arms about his neck, she kissed him, let him kiss her. He uttered a cry of joy and pressed her to him, until she asked him to let her go.

Afterwards she sat dejected and gazed vacantly out to sea. Anxiously he suggested: "You want to take the next boat, and abandon me?"

Aetheria: "I will not abandon you, believe me, I won't abandon you."

His anxiety persisted, it was a love-sickness. It could not remain so. Every night he lay sleepless. I can't let her go, I sense she will abandon me, I can't let her go out into the world and know she's out there and is forever torn from me."

And when Aetheria saw and heard him, she was fully swayed. Who am I, she asked herself, why do I still resist? I must sacrifice myself. I must plead with God to lend me the strength.

She promised to go with him to Greece. He had friends in the town. He ran about as if enchanted, and made preparations for the betrothal feast.

Must I sacrifice myself, she asked. I will do it all, I shall endure it all.

*

And then there she was in her room, she confessed all to her angel, called out passionately.

"What do you want?" the angel asked. "You are a woman. Why won't you follow him, in accordance with the laws of your people? Are you no woman just because you are a Christian?"

"But must I? I do acknowledge the law."

"Why won't you follow Pausanias?"

"Because I am a prisoner of God."

She waited for the voice. A long while passed. She lay down and called out silently. She wrung her hands.

“What do you want?” came the voice again.

“I implore you, unbind me from that law.”

“And what path shall the tender pilgrim Aetheria take?”

“I wanted Valerio and my love, it almost cost me my life. Ever since I’ve known God’s love, I only want to be the sinful woman who kissed the feet of his Son and bathed him with her tears and soothed his skin. Ah, you Invisible, how should I follow the law of women?”

She heard distant voices: “We await you with yearning. Aetheria, come.” For the whole night they sang out: “Come.”

In the morning, the deeper voice of the Invisible joined in. At last she could hear it clear as a bell. It told her: “Your time of struggle is over, Aetheria. It ended long ago. Now you know what lies before you.”

She kept silent.

The voice: “You have heard me, now you want something more.”

Aetheria: “Yes. That you remove a burden from me. I don’t want to hurt him.”

How sternly the Invisible had spoken before, like a teacher, a judge. Now the voice was gentle, tender, and brought tears to her eyes. It spoke like a brother, or even a lover.

“Aetheria, he shall not suffer, you will leave him a gift behind you. Go by night to his room. He will be asleep. Touch his hand lightly. He shall visit in his dream all that he knew of you before he sought you at the harbour.”

“And why did I have to meet him again this time?”

“To know that you are saying goodbye.”

Aetheria: “I am grateful that you take me to him one last time.”

And softly she began a song of praise to God.

The angel joined in. She praised all the miracles in the world, including love between man and woman. The angel stroked her cheek.

*

Pausanias dreamed of her, in great delight. When he awoke next morning he felt it was no mortal joy, but something unearthly. He got up. Aetheria has gone. Aetheria has abandoned me. He grieved mightily. He lamented all day long. But he no longer went looking for her.

Soon he set out for Greece. The bliss he felt in his dream glowed and blossomed within him. He was able to speak of it with a philosopher; he told of the pilgrim woman he had met, had found again, about her second disappearance. But he betrayed nothing of the unfading unfathomable bliss that filled him at the thought of her.

*

I want to go to Rome. I must go to Rome.

When morning came she ran from the house. Where to? Down to the harbour. A ship was making ready to sail. Oh, I’m going back, across the sea.

Misty heaving sea. She disregarded it. At the harbour of Brindisi she spoke to no one. And now to Portosa, to Valerio's grave.

Valerio, it's you, my own flesh. You've lain so long in the earth. You dear, blessed man. What I'm looking for still on this Earth? Nothing, I look for nothing. I'm simply here. Angels called out all night long: Come, come.

Her brother looked at her and said: "I know you want to go to Rome. Don't deny it. What will you do there?"

"I will go to Rome because Valerio, as you know, sent me there. I must seek out the Elder, venerable Ebonius, and tell him: now I can say what you insist I say. I couldn't, back then."

"I don't understand. The emperor persecutes Christians."

"I know. We must render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's."

"What will you render unto Caesar?"

"If he demands it, my life."

"You're crazy, Aetheria."

"And I will render my sinful soul unto God. I want to stand at the steps to His throne and praise Him along with all the angels. I shall be happy."

"Sister Aetheria, you will not go to Rome."

Julia, the brother's wife, walked with her in the garden. "Aetheria my dear, you were away so long, you were in Jerusalem, you've travelled enough. You've done all a pilgrim can do. Stay with us, and rest."

Now Aetheria wept and stayed unhappily with them. Her brother took pity on her: "Sister, I have you to thank for my still being alive. If you hadn't come to Rome that time, they would have killed me. Should I let you travel back there alone, so they can arrest you?"

She covered her face and groaned. The brother knew she would not agree to his plan. He said: "Well then, all I can do is keep you here against your will. I must tie you up so you can't run away."

They kept watch on Aetheria all day, at evening went with her to her room and tied her up. She implored them to let her go. But they kept her there, and she had to endure it. In the morning they untied her. By day she could walk about freely, at evening they took her to her room, and tied her up. By the third day she no longer resisted. She offered her hands, laid herself down and let them tie her feet. But when she woke in the night and stretched her arms, the rope slid down. And when she sat up and reached for her ankles: the rope lay already loose against her shins. She rose from the cot, went down on her knees, and said a humble prayer of thanks. Dressed quickly, then across the field, through the wood and on her way.

*

These were the same roads she walked along with the five women, after that paradisaical moonlit night that began it all. Now Aetheria pilgrimed alone. She often hid away so as not to be seen. Back then she was torn asunder by grief, filled with hatred and vengeance, now she yearned. Back then she had two prayers, now only one. Ardent love set wings to her feet.

My God, tell me what you have in store for me? Do you have some command for me? Am I your instrument, your pliable instrument? Can I actually be one? Have you set me a task? My God, you have done so much to me, what do you still have in store?

Come, reverberated in her, and like an echo: Come. Come. You need only come.

She rejoiced: I am on my way.

*

Mountain slopes loomed bright yellow. Gorse bushes were in bloom. Back then the women made camp here and sang: they had human bodies and wore human clothing, lived on bread and fish and fruit. But already they sang of Heaven, of Christ who died on the cross, and of Mary his mother.

In their twittering and whoops of joy, they resembled birds rocking on branches.

The long journey, long flight, heat and cold. At last the broad military road, army posts, strange peoples. She went unremarked. And here is Rome, great by no means feared by no means mighty Rome.

And where to find Eubonius, the venerable man? For this is why I've pilgrimed here to Rome, to ask after him, back then you set me a task to utter three sentences. I've come to greet you, and thank you, and tell you that I've learned them. It took an awfully long time. Praised be the name of the Lord: this sentence I shall utter constantly. And because my body is so weak and refuses to do what I must do, Eubonius, well, I no longer want my stupid rotten body. I don't want to perch like a bird in a tree and hop around on branches and enjoy myself.

She hurried to Psittakos' house. She once lived there a long while with his family, his wife and children. Others now occupied the house. And when she asked for Psittakos a man invited her in, questioned her: when had she got to know him? He's gone away, to another region. She replied: I knew him and his family, and once lived in this house.

"So you must be a Christian?"

She said: "Yes."

The man went to the door and called his wife. He gave her a sign as she stood in the doorway, and invited Aetheria to sit with them and take refreshment. And would she tell them all about her visit to Rome, and who she used to meet at this house.

Now Aetheria realised she had fallen into the hands of the emperor's informants and rounders-up. She shuddered. Her heart contracted, but only for a moment. Then she stood, and ignoring the others she lifted both arms into the air and praised God, and His Son Jesus Christ who stands by us in all our mortal perils, and shall redeem us. She gave no indication that she had seen through the man and his wife. She nodded to the wife when she excused herself to just pop out for a moment and fetch a melon from the next street. The wife left. Aetheria sat silently facing the man.

Has it come to this? Tell me, tell me clearly, that it will soon be enough.

When the wife returned with two soldiers of the watch, Aetheria kept her eyes closed. The soldiers stood right in front of her and bombarded her with questions: Where do you come from? What are you up to here?

She told them she was from Portosa near Salerno, and wanted to speak to Psittakos, she had lived here with his family years ago. Aetheria asked the soldiers: "Where is Psittakos?"

The soldiers grinned: "We'll take you to him. His dwelling place is just a few paces from here, ten feet under the ground."

Aetheria replied: "Psittakos does not dwell there. For he was a pious Christian. Even if the emperor has taken his life."

They punched her in the chest. "And you knew old Ebonius, with the beard? You'll meet him tomorrow."

*

Next morning she was taken to the place of execution along with Ebonius. As they walked, Ebonius rejoiced and sang and thanked mighty God who had sacrificed his Son for us – what meagre thanks if we give our lives for Him.

Aetheria did not sing. She was wrapped in a cloud. Her gait was unsteady, drunken. She could not control her head, it wobbled like a loose flower. She tripped and stumbled. The guards dragged her back up and laughed at the distorted enraptured expressions on the delinquent faces.

Now the little bird can twitter no more. No more will you travel the stony highway, no more will you traipse up hill down dale along the coast. Aetheria, sisterly face, raise your eyes, look at us, speak to us. Greetings, sister Aetheria.

Profound streaming joy. Against a dark background a silver spinning top spins, flashes, vanishes in white sparks.

And now very close to her throat the voice of the Invisible, the words cloudy, an echo back and forth. Aetheria strained to understand.

"You show yourself again at last, Invisible? Will you reveal yourself?"

He called her name.

She nodded.

"Now you are free. Are you not afraid?"

"Of what?"

"Have you no sense of –?"

"Of what?"

"Of fear?"

"Only longing. What should I call you, my companion, my true friend? Am I not worthy to know your name?"

"You may speak to me."

And he whispered a name to her. She lifted her head and laughed: "That's my name!"

"Mine too."

Aetheria was astonished.

"Then you are my sister?"

The angel laughed.

He kissed her neck. He took her to himself.

As she knelt at the place of execution, she was already past the final step.

*

Did Earth's gravity, did Earth's gravity still press down on Aetheria?

Turbid and confused was she, like someone who has suffered a heavy blow. What was stuck to her, squeezing her together? She tried to ask: where am I? But the question vanished even before it was formed. Thoughts fluttered from her like scraps of paper. She felt that much had happened, and much more was happening.

*

What grew in her was longing. Such longing grew within her.

Who am I? What am I?

Until it happened: terror, shock, and she fell apart.

The husk torn from her.

Darkness dissolved in light.

Invisibles, such a tumult, surrounded her, welcomed her.

They rejoiced with her.

They adorned her, led her on.

Sister, such a hard journey you've had.

Now you have come, such a long pilgrimage.

And kisses, tears,

Oh sister, how long have we waited for you.

How you struggled against our God.

She has entered upon a new life.

Such throngs, such whirring about here,

Such motion, like an ocean current.

But longing, longing grew within her.

The current tumbled her along.

Dull cries, crackling, rumbling.

Voices from afar, calling to each other, calling to her,

Angels calling:

Aetheria, stay with us,

Sister, how you've been abused.

We spoke so often to you.

We've called out to you since you were a child.

Since you were a child you have answered us,

You sang and laughed and laughed with us,

And yet you would not come.

They held Aetheria,

And now such kisses, tears, embracings.

Was it hours? Days?
Years? Centuries?
In motion, or just standing still?
At rest, or flying?

Here was no day, no high road,
Not above, not below, not left, not right.
The millrace flowed on.

Aetheria pulled herself free.
She surfaced.
She loosened and swelled and freed herself.
Aetheria, how you tremble.
Vanished, sunken Rome.
The village of Portosa near Salerno,
Vesuvius dissolved in smoke.
And the port of Brindisi.

Voices fading: "Instead of that, instead of that."
On the vast black carpet sparks were scattered
And as if she were nothing
She freed herself.

Angels cried: Stay with us! Sister, stay!
Help us to consummate Christ's work of salvation.

But she – already having journeyed so long,
Pilgrimed so long –
She had to reach her goal.

And after the struggling and whirling,
After the spinning tumbling,
Her longing, longing
Sped her high like an arrow.
Arrow-swift she shot up high
Into whiteness, the unfathomable.
Into radiance, golden, irremovable.
Into the irremovable, the expectant,
Into a gold like the honey of bees,
Irremovable, expectant –
Into sweetness, honey-sweet,
That flowed all about her, hot sweetness
That dissolved her, elevated her,
Exploding in bliss.

Now I am come.
Now I am here.
And I am nothing now,
And have only Thee,
The sea of all seas,

The One of all Ones.
And all I have is Thee.
Just a little drop in Thine ocean
And in Thy bliss,
Breaking on Thy shore
And shattering like spray before Thee.

So much had happened to her
That she broke and scattered like droplets of spray
As she approached the golden honey
In silence, flying
– Aleino, Uleino –
And now the stem, the stem
Could no longer hold the sap.
Sap broke free from leaf and bud.
From every pore like amber from fir tree.
Longing broke free from Aetheria,
And was transformed to blessedness.

And thirsting, entreating, and giving thanks,
– Aleino, Uleino, Eia –
And gentle sighing, until she gave in
And the blue carpet unrolled
And she glided over it.

*

And so this is what happened to Aetheria.

She had wriggled free of heavenly grace.
But now below God's throne is her resting place.

THE END