
Opening Extract from...

Butterflies in November

Written by Audur Ava Olafsdottir

Published by Pushkin Press

Pushkin Press
71–75 Shelton Street
London WC2H 9JQ

Butterflies in November was first published in Iceland as *Rigning í nóvember* by Salka

This edition first published by Pushkin Press in 2013

ISBN 978 1 782270 10 2

MIÐSTÖÐ ÍSLENSKRA BÓKMENNTA
ICELANDIC LITERATURE CENTER

We thank the Icelandic Literature Center for their generous support of this translation.

Set in Monotype Baskerville by Tetragon, London
and printed in Great Britain by the CPI Group, UK

www.pushkinpress.com

Dedicated to Melkorka Sigríður

Where are there towns but no houses,
roads but no cars, forests but no trees?

Answer: on a map.

(Riddle on children's breakfast TV)

ZERO

This is how it appears to me now, as I look back, without perhaps fully adhering to the chronology of events. In any case, there we are, pressed against each other in the middle of the photograph. I've got my arm draped over his shoulder and he is holding onto me somewhere—lower, inevitably—a dark brown lock of hair dangles over my very pale forehead, and he smiles from ear to ear, clutching something in his outstretched clenched hand.

His protruding ears sit low on his large head and his hearing aid, which seems unusually big and antiquated, looks like a receiver for picking up messages from outer space. Unnaturally magnified by the thick lenses of his spectacles, his eyes seem to almost fill the glass, giving him a slightly peculiar air. In fact, people turn on the street to gawk at him, staring first at him, then at me, and then pin their eyes back on him again for as long as he stays in view, as we walk across the playground, for example, and I close the iron gate behind us. As I help him into the seat of the car and fasten his safety belt, I notice we are still being watched from other cars.

In the background of the photograph, there is a four-year-old manual car. The three goldfish are writhing in the boot—he doesn't know that yet—and the double blue sleeping bag is soaking wet. Soon I'll be buying two new down duvets at the Co-op, because it's not proper for a thirty-three-year-old woman to be sharing a sleeping

bag with an unrelated child, it's simply not done. It shouldn't be any bother to buy them because the glove compartment is crammed with notes, straight from the bank. No crime has been committed, though, unless it's a crime to have slept with three men within a 300-kilometre stretch of the Ring Road, in that mostly untarmacked zone, where the coastal strip is at its narrowest, wedged between glaciers and the shore, and there is an abundance of single-lane bridges.

Nothing is as it should be. It's the last day of November, the island is engulfed in darkness and we are both wearing sweaters. I'm in a white polo-neck and he is in a newly knit mint-green hoodie with a cabled pattern. The temperature is similar to what it was in Lisbon the day before, according to the man on the radio, and the forecast is for rain and warmer weather ahead. This is the reason why a woman shouldn't be venturing into the dark wilderness alone with a child, without good reason, least of all in the vicinity of those single-lane bridges, where the roads are frequently flooded.

I'm not presumptuous enough to expect a new lover to appear at every single-lane bridge, without wanting, however, to preclude such a possibility.

When I look at the picture in greater detail, I see a young man, a few steps behind us, about seventeen years old I would guess, between me and the boy, although his face is slightly out of focus. I discern delicate facial features under his cap and get the feeling he has bad skin, which is beginning to improve. He seems sleepy and leans against the petrol pump with his eyes half closed.

If one were to examine the photo in extreme close-up, I wouldn't be surprised if there were traces of feathers on the tyres or bloodstains on the hubcaps, even though three weeks had passed since my husband walked out with the orthopaedic mattress from the double bed, all the camping equipment and ten boxes of books—that's just how

it went. But one needs to bear in mind that things are not always what they seem and, contrary to the dead stillness of a photograph, reality is in a state of perpetual flux.

ONE

Thank God it wasn't a child.

I unfasten my safety belt and leap out of the car to examine the animal. It seems to be pretty much in one piece, totally unconscious, with a dangling neck and bleeding chest. I suspect a crushed goose heart under its oil-soiled plumage.

Papers flew out of their folders as I screeched to a halt, translations in various languages are scattered on the floor, although an entire pile of documents has remained intact on the crammed back seat.

The good thing about my job—and one of the perks that I never hesitate to remind my clients of—is that I deliver everything to them in person, drive over to them with proof-read articles, theses and translations, as if they were Thai noodle salads and spring rolls. It might seem old-fashioned, but it works. People like the tangibility of paper and, for one brief moment, to glimpse into the eyes of the stranger who has, in some cases, peered into the essence of their souls. It's best to deliver right before dinner, I find, just as the pasta is reaching cooking point and cannot be left a second longer, or when the onion has been fried and the fish lies waiting on a bed of breadcrumbs, and the master of the house hasn't had the good sense to turn off the heat under the frying pan before answering the door. In my experience that's the quickest way to get through it. People don't

like inviting guests into a house smelling of food or to get sucked into a discussion with a stranger when they're standing there in their socks or even bare-footed, in the middle of a narrow hallway crammed with shoes and surrounded by squabbling children. In my experience these are the ideal circumstances in which to settle a bill with the least likelihood of people trying to persuade me to knock off the VAT. As soon as I tell them I don't take credit cards, they put up no resistance and swiftly write me a cheque and grab their delivery.

When people come to me in the small office space I rent down by the harbour, they normally give themselves plenty of time to ponder on my remarks and convince me of their good intentions, of their in-depth knowledge of the subject matter, and precisely why they decided to word things in the way they did. It's not my job to rewrite their articles, they tell me, pointing out that in such and such a paragraph I skipped nine words, but simply to correct typos, as one of my customers put it, as he was adjusting his glasses and tie in the mirror in the hallway and flattening his kiss curls.

The idea wasn't to oversimplify complex concepts, he says, the article is geared to experts in the field. Even though I had refrained from making any comments on his dubious use of the dative case in his *Dam Project Report*, I did wonder whether the word *beneficial*, which cropped up more than fourteen times on one page, might not occasionally be replaced by alternative and slightly more exotic adjectives, such as *propitious* or *advantageous*. This wasn't something I said out loud, but simply a thought I entertained to perk myself up. Once these issues have been settled, some men like to say a little bit about themselves and also to ask some questions about me, whether I'm married, for

example, and that kind of thing. On two or three occasions I've even toasted bread for them. I have to confess, though, that I didn't write my ad. It was my friend Auður, who obviously got a bit carried away. Overkill isn't my style:

> *I provide proof-reading services and revise BA theses and articles for specialized magazines and publications on any subject. I also revise electoral speeches, irrespective of party affiliations, and correct any revealing errors in anonymous complaints and/or secret letters of admiration, and remove any inept or inaccurate philosophical or poetic references from congratulatory speeches and elevate obituaries to a higher (almost divine) level. I am fully versed in all the quotations of our departed national poets.*
>
> *I translate from eleven languages both into and out of Icelandic, including Russian, Polish and Hungarian. Fast and accurate translations. Home delivery service. All projects are treated as confidential.*

I pick up the lukewarm bird I've just run over and assume it's a male. By a cruel twist of fate, I recently proof-read an article about the love lives of geese and their unique and lifelong fidelity to their mates. I scan the flock in search of his widowed companion. The very last members are still waddling across the slippery icy road, towards the sidewalk on the other side, spreading their big orange webbed feet on the tarmac. As far as I can make out, none of them has stepped out of the flock to look for her partner and I can't see any likely match for the bird I'm holding in my arms. I have, however, recently developed the knack for distinguishing black cats on the street from each other on the basis of their responses to caresses and sudden emotional reactions. The thing that surprises me the most, as I stand there in the middle

of the road, still holding the fairly plump animal by the neck, is that I feel neither repulsion nor guilt. I like to think of myself as a reasonably compassionate human being; I try to avoid confrontation, find it difficult to reject requests delicately put to me by sensitive males, and buy every lottery ticket that any charity slips through my letterbox. And yet, when I go to the supermarket later on and stand there in front of the butcher's slab, I'll feel the same rush of excitement I get before Christmas, as I muse on the spices and trimmings, and wonder whether the pattern of the Goodyear tyre will be visible under the thick wild game sauce.

"Well then, good year to you in advance," is what I'll say to my guests at the surprise dinner party I'll throw on a dark November night, without any further explanations.

I rip out several pages of a painfully tedious article about thermal conductors to place under the bird, before carefully lowering the carcass into the boot. It's obviously ages since I opened it, because I discover that it is almost completely full of kitchen rolls that I bought to sponsor some sports excursion for disabled kids—a good job I didn't opt for the prawns.

The goose won't suffer the same fate, because I'm about to spring a fun culinary surprise on my husband, the great chef himself. First, though, I was planning on taking one last detour to an apartment block in the Melar district to do something I'd told myself I would never do again.

TWO

I park my car close to the block and rush up the threadbare carpet of the lily-blue staircase, tackling two steps at a time. I

don't allow myself to be bothered by the two or three doors that open during my ascent, ever so slightly, to the width of the vertical slit of a letter box, releasing the odours of well-kept homes. I don't care if anyone can retrace my steps, because what I am about to do for the third time in three weeks is not a habit of mine, but a total exception in my marriage. When I rush out later on, I'll be able to tell myself that I won't be coming back here any more, which is why I can afford to be indifferent to those gaps in the doorways and prying eyes. I'm in a hurry to wrap my hands around my lover's neck, standing on his newly laid parquet, and to run my fingers down the hollow of his neck, leaving a red streak in their wake, and then to get it over with, as soon as possible, so that I can buy the trimmings for the goose before the shops close. The most time-consuming task turns out to be the removal of my boots; he stretches to hold onto the door frame as I offer him one foot. He has removed his glasses and his eyes are glued to me throughout. The faint October sun, which is sinking over the tip of Seltjarnarnes, filters through the semi-closed slats of the venetian blinds, corrugating our bodies in stripes, like two zebras meeting furtively by a pool of water. I can sense from the waft of washing powder emanating from the bedclothes that he has changed the sheets. Everything is very tidy; this is the kind of apartment I could easily abandon in a fire or war, without taking anything with me, without any regrets. The only incongruous detail in the decor is the patterned curtain valances, concealing the top of the blinds.

"Mum made those and gave them to me when I divorced," he says, clearing his throat.

Naturally, the environment is bound to change according to one's moods and feelings, although I don't want to get into

a discussion on the notion of beauty and well-being right now. One can't exactly say that there's anything premeditated about the fact that I'm sitting here naked on the edge of this bed, nothing planned as such, it's just the way my life is at the moment. I'm indifferent to the drabness or even perhaps ugliness of this apartment and I don't mind that he sometimes spells *hyper* with an *i* or writes *hidrodinamic fluid*, and if he can be a bit vulgar in the way he talks or even inappropriate sometimes, it is because he has a firm and secure touch. Although I can't really boast of any extensive experience in this field, I know there is no correlation between sex and linguistics, I've learnt that much.

A small feather has stuck to the bloodstain on the first page, but I don't have to ponder on whether I should give him the article before or afterwards. I know from experience that it's best to wait, business and pleasure shouldn't be mixed. After we had slept together for the first time, he looked surprised when I handed him the bill with the VAT clearly highlighted.

After the deed, I help him smooth out the sheet, while he squeezes the goose-down quilt back into the stripy blue cover, which has slipped off the foot of the bed into a ball. He confides in me, sharing something a woman should never divulge. It is only then that I first notice the bizarre tattoo on his lower back. It vaguely resembles a spider's web, which seems incongruous for a man of his social status. Skimming it, I feel the protuberance of a scar. When I quiz him about it, he tells me it was an accident, but I don't know whether he is referring to the scar or the tattoo. He holds out his hand, clutching a pair of white lace panties between his thumb and index.

"Aren't these yours?" he asks, as if they could be someone else's.

I'm in a hurry to get home, but when I've finished washing my hands with his pink floating scented soap and step out of the bathroom, I see he has set the table, boiled eggs, buttered two slices of toast with salmon and made some tea for me. He is still topless and bare-footed and stands there, watching me eating, as he slips his shirt back on.

"I saw your car in town in the middle of the week and parked right beside it, didn't you notice?" he asks.

Can't say that I did.

"So you didn't notice that someone had scraped the ice off your windscreen either?"

No, I didn't, but thanks anyway.

"I noticed your car is due for an MOT…"

When I've finished both slices of toast and am about to say thanks and kiss him goodbye because I won't be coming back again, he asks me how often I think about him.

Every three or four days, I say.

"That makes 5.6 times over the past three weeks," says the newly divorced expert, who has only fastened one of the buttons on his gaping shirt. "I obviously think of you a lot more than you think of me, about sixty times a day and also when I wake up at night. I wonder what you're up to, and watch you putting on your cream after the bath, trying to figure out what it must be like to be you. Then, in the evenings, I imagine you don't slip into bed until your husband is asleep."

My husband isn't home much in the evenings these days.

Then he asks me if I intend to divorce him.

"No, that hasn't entered my mind," I say.

Because I probably love my husband. But I don't say that. Then he bluntly tells me that this will be the last time.

"The last time that what?"

"That we sleep together. It's too painful saying goodbye to you every time, I feel like I'm standing on the edge of a cliff and I'm scared of heights."

It has grown eerily dark by the time I dash down the stairs of the apartment block for the third time in as many weeks. This time I'm gone for good and I will never again do what I've just done, I'm in a hurry to get home. Even if it is unlikely that anyone is waiting for me there. Driving, I listen to Mendelssohn's "Summer Song" on the car radio. It's an old crackly recording, but the presenter doesn't seem to notice, not that I'm really listening to it.