

SAMPLE
TRANSLATION

JANI VIRK

WHAT THE RIVER
WASHED AWAY, WHAT
WENT UP IN SMOKE

PUBLISHED BY: ŠTUDENTSKA ZALOŽBA, 2012

TRANSLATED BY: GREGOR TIMOTHY ČEH

ORIGINAL TITLE: KAR JE ODNESLA REKA, KAR JE ODNESSEL DIM

NUMBER OF PAGES: 151

Jani Virk: What the River Washed Away, What Went Up In Smoke

Chapter IV. Far From People, Close to God

A stream meanders gently through a narrow valley amidst smoothly rounded hills. All around is a motionless green silence. A rider in chain mail moves leisurely along a seldom-used path. He carries a shoulder bag and has only a shortsword strapped to his waist. Every so often he dismounts his horse to avoid having to negotiate the branches that have grown over the path and continues on foot. When the path opens up he jumps back onto his horse and rides again. He is William, exhausted and pensive from the nights spent with his Bella, absorbed in thinking about the conversation that had lasted through the night till morning; after his long absence they could not restrain themselves from trying to make up for all the love-making and exchange all the words they had been denied because of his service in the garrison at Ptuj Castle. Heavy dark clouds cover the sky, the air is thick and charged with a taunt energy. To the lone man in the woods it seems as if swarms of bees are forcing themselves between the thick layers of air, buzzing tenfold in their anxious fight for life and becoming stuck in the links of his mail. At any moment now a bright flash of lightning will rip through the air and heavy raindrops will start falling to the ground.

He had already seen the ashen bodies of comrades and strangers who had lost their lives struck by lightning, caught in the deathly embrace of their metal armour, and the last thing he wanted was such a death. He feels strangely dishonoured at the thought that after all the bloody battles with the Saracens and the Magyars he had survived by the Grace of God and by his own proficiency and skill in battle, his wife and children would have to see him so pointlessly and helplessly dead, scorched and enshrouded in the cold metal mesh. He stops, removes his chain mail, placing it into the hollow of a large tree by the stream. Using his sword he hacks off a couple of branches at the trunk so he can identify the tree on his way back. It is not far to his destination now, he should soon reach the brethren at the Lower Monastery, and from there the Upper Monastery of Saint John the Baptist at the end of the valley is only a short ride away. Once there he will meet the Prior and, he hopes, Father Peter, a friend of his youth from his native England.

Suddenly a fierce wind rushes down the valley. Leaves rustle, branches creak, cherry blossom falls, the white petals swirling in the air like large snowflakes in a winter storm. William spurs his horse, holds on and gallops up the valley. He soon reaches the Lower Monastery surrounded by meadows and tilled fields. Halting his horse he considers seeking shelter from the storm inside. Twice, three times the horse rears, then, just at the moment the wind ceases and the rain is about to pour from the heavens, William urges it forward into a race against time.

The first heavy drops are already hitting the ground as he glimpses the monastery and the monastic church at the head of the valley. Someone had noticed his arrival and must have recognised him; the monastery gate opens and amidst the ever heavier thud of raindrops the gatekeeper in his brown habit awaits him. Leading the horse into a small wooden stable outside the monastic enclosure, the monk returns to the courtyard to silently escort William to the chapter house and goes off to fetch the Prior.

From a pocket sewn inside his garment William pulls a sealed letter and places it on the table. He glances over it, feeling it with his fingers, satisfied that not a single raindrop has managed to reach it. He is exhausted after his sleepless nights and wild riding over the last track of his journey. A sharp pain between his eyes seems to be spreading throughout his head. It is just after lunch on Sunday, a time when the Sacristan hands out writing equipment and books to be copied and studied by the monks. Through the window William observes the monk, hidden inside his white habit, holding the books in his arms, calmly, almost weightlessly walking through the small cloister leading from the library towards the church. He disappears inside and emerges on the other side, crosses the larger cloister and walks off towards a small building beyond. Others follow him after a while. William tries in vain to recognise Peter among them by trying to recall his outline or the way he walked, but the white silhouettes of the monks he sees through curtains of rain are blurry and look identical. They seem like apparitions in a dream, like souls humbly shuffling through the labyrinths of Purgatory, waiting to recover their bodies on Judgement Day.

As he steps into the chapter house the Prior looks like a harsh and unpleasant man. He does not show any indication of being glad of his visitor or even recognising him, despite the fact that William had been coming to the Charterhouse two or three times a year for the last few years, either bearing some important message from Frederick of Ptuj or to buy precious parchment from him or just borrow a book. The Prior sits at the table opposite William, opens the letter sent by Frederick, reads it without any expression on his face and then nods. William knows nothing of the contents of the message.

“Do you have any parchment for me?” William asks after a while, emptying a few coins from his purse onto the table and pushing them over to the Prior. “I would take a little extra this time, as well as some ink and a couple of quills. This year I might possibly move permanently from Ptuj Castle to an estate of my own. I will have more time for writing and I would not like to disturb your peace too often with my visits.”

“I doubt the wisdom of writing anything but the Word of God, given to us through his prophets and His Son and brought closer to our mere human minds by the commentaries, letters, biblical poems and lives of the Saints interpreted by the likes of Saint Augustine, Jerome, Anselm of Canterbury, Saint Bernard of Clairvaux or Hildebert, Archbishop of Tours,” the Prior says coldly as he sorts and counts the coins. “The soul is a bride, seeking and waiting for God, her groom; all the rest is meaningless,” he adds. “Logic, grammar and dialectics without true faith lead not to Heaven, but straight to Hell,” he continues. “When words do not follow the Lord, they are appropriated by the Devil. Without faith, words and letters are

vanquished to dust. That is why we ought constantly to repeat the words of Saint Anselm: We believe in order to understand.” He falls silent and observes the effect his words are having on William. “In any case,” he concludes, “you might better make use of your joy for writing were you to join us here at the monastery. You could write every day for the rest of your life.”

“It probably would not please God if his words were to be transcribed by a hand which has, albeit in most cases in his honour and glory, shed so much blood. And what time I have left I should better devote to my family and children, so they can tread along life’s path in a straighter and more righteous manner than myself,” William replies, playing penitent, putting on a regretful look in front of the Prior.

“For this money you could buy a dozen head of cattle or a dozen and a half sheep. Your family would benefit more from them,” says the Prior after counting the money. “But, as you wish, I will not try to persuade you. It was clear to me the moment I met you that it would be easier to lead some Saracen onto the right path than yourself,” the Prior continues in an apparently strict and harsh tone, though slight traces of congeniality and affection are now detectable in his voice. Collecting the money from the table he leaves the room, returning after a while with a large bundle of parchment leaves, some writing equipment and two books.

“Today you get Saint Augustine’s Confessions and Guibert of Nogent,” he says, “and although you are late for lunch I am sure we can manage to find some fish for you too,” he adds, sending him off to the refectory.

William sits alone in the large refectory and eats. There is carp with some vegetables on the plate in front of him and a jug of diluted wine next to it. He has almost finished and every now and then he looks towards the door, waiting for Peter to arrive. As usual he had asked the Prior to send for him, but isn’t sure whether he has actually done so or indeed whether Peter intended to come to meet him or not. He knows the commandment from the Carthusian rules that monks should only speak when essential and is well aware that there is nothing essential about his visits to the monastery or the conversations with Peter. With each visit he feels that they have less and less to say and the distance between them widens. “I pray, I work, I transcribe,” are the only words William could remember from his last visit. Thinking about what else they had talked about, it seems to him that apart from repeating these words a few times, Peter had said very little else.

Breathing in the cold, stale monastic air, he rolls the watered-down wine round his mouth and recalls how they had met as young students at Oxford, later to search further knowledge and adventures in Paris where, in awe of famous tutors and the great town with Notre Dame being built towards Heaven like Jacob’s Ladder, all they had done for the first few months was attend lectures on the Montagne Sainte-Geneviève and sit at home and study. Only after six months did they shyly dare join the older students and venture out into the town, becoming initiated into the daily bustle and soon after also the nightlife of the city. In an inn by the Seine they met an itinerant monk from Normandy singing audacious and unusual songs. He knew all the highlights of Paris, particularly its low life. Making friends with him, they began to wander around together. Becoming less and less occupied with the Aristotle’s

treatises, Abelard, Peter Lombard, or grammar, rhetoric and logic, and started drinking and gambling more and more frequently at various inns in the company of a motley crew of students, singers and merrymakers, singing songs that celebrated a free and careless life and mocked more or less everything else, particularly the clergy and the corrupt court of the Pope in Rome. They exchanged day for night, books for drink, dice and carousing with loose women, discovering an entirely new world in which they felt like the Rulers of the Realm, more powerful than the Capets of France. This new-found world of theirs continued to expand, pushing God further and further away until one night in a drunken brawl next to the Pont au Change they pushed some loud-mouthed student from Picardy into the river. He didn't know how to swim and drowned. As the poor fellow's body sank into the depths of the Seine, so their souls began to sink into the abyss of eternal damnation. That same night they left Paris, that wayward, rowdy piece of heaven on earth. This flower of the world, this comfort of the universe had for them suddenly become darkened by the huge shadow of terrible guilt. They fled back to England, the burden of murder too heavy for their youthful shoulders, broken in their unsuccessful attempt at flying carelessly through life. Whilst crossing the sea they heard about an epidemic of leprosy in their native Wiltshire and about William's elder brother being killed in one of King Henry's military campaigns against rebellious groups of Irish on the western boundaries of his kingdom. When they arrived home they discovered that leprosy had also struck their own families; Peter's mother had died a few days earlier and his father and both William's parents were being attended to at the Order of Saint Lazarus. When they both saw them it was immediately obvious: their faces and bodies were disintegrating just as their own souls had begun to disintegrate as they followed the path of sin and debauchery in Paris that had brought about this wave of decay, dying and death spreading through their kin. Peter took immediate measures, leaving all that had been his life to that point behind and requesting acceptance into Witham Charterhouse. William retreated to his parents' castle and replaced books and wine with weapons used in battle and hunting and as the eldest son also took charge of the estates. Somehow he had convinced himself that this would be the easiest way of redeeming himself for the curse he had brought upon his family. The curse dealt further blows without mercy. Eaten away by leprosy, both his parents died soon after. A few weeks later his younger brother succumbed to injuries sustained in a hunting accident and then his only sister died giving birth to her first child. He was left alone, a vestige of his own family, without woman or wife, merciless unto himself and any pleasures that life could still offer.

In 1187 Saladin seized Jerusalem with his army. The Christian world was defeated and humiliated and the Pope announced plenary indulgences for all who would join or die participating in the Crusade. William was convinced that God was offering him a last chance of salvation. As a young man of twenty five he could then still believe what he now, seventeen years later, could no longer uphold – that this would truly save his damned soul from eternal damnation. After years of internal battles and fearing for his soul, he had finally broken off with everything his life had consisted of to that point and had handed over all his property to the Templars, joining their order in London with three horses and his military equipment. A few weeks later he sailed from England to Marseille and from there onwards to the Holy Land.

A whole lifetime had passed when, three years ago, the two friends had unexpectedly met again within the walls of the Charterhouse in the Valley of Saint John the Baptist. Peter had been a monk at Witham for almost twenty years. He first became known for his beautiful writing and later for his particular skill in using a reed pen and various pigmented inks with which he illuminated the initials of his manuscripts, enveloping them in exuberant foliage and animal forms. He might well have stayed at Witham until the end of his life, were it not for John Lackland coming to the throne of England after the death of his brother Richard the Lionheart. Peter considered the new king to be a weak leader and had long despised and hated him for his intrigues, crudeness and hypocritical slyness. His vulgar behaviour and vile deeds became ever more apparent and blatant to the skies after he came to power. There was not a single remote place or secluded monk's cell in all the land under his rule where it was possible to hide from them. When Peter, confined behind the walls of Witham, found out from his monastic brethren how their worldly leader John, soon after his ascension to the throne, had his first marriage annulled and took the twelve year old Isabella of Angoulême from the south of France as his wife and despite her youth immediately exerted his marital rights upon her, he had asked to be transferred to a different monastery. He no longer wanted to live in a land ruled by such a man and could not allow his life and work, that he wished to devote entirely to God, to be upset by hatred and contempt. Some years earlier he had found out from the master builder Aynardus about the Charterhouse he had worked on before he came to work on the distant Isle of Britain amidst the meagre walls of Witham, to erect buildings worthy of God's glory. A monastery at the opposite end of Christian Europe, in the Valley of Saint John the Baptist, sheltered by the surrounding hills and forests, so close to God that any ordinary man could hardly bear such tranquillity and beauty. He made the journey in the opposite direction to the famous architect and continued his prayers and illumination in the motionless quiet of the Charterhouse in the Duchy of Styria. In the meantime William had walked the path from Hell to Heaven and back, to eventually end up somewhere in between, his body in the embrace of his beloved Bella, right on the verge of Heaven, his soul in the labyrinths at the brink of Hell wherein were hidden far more questions than answers. In battles from Gaza and Hebron to Antioch he traversed the land around Jerusalem and had a few close shaves with death. After recuperating from a serious injury he accompanied pilgrims on the road to the River Jordan for a while and later sailed to Marseille as part of an armed escort bringing pilgrims to the Holy Land safely to prevent them from meeting a fate similar to those who sailed on ships of Pisan and Genovese traders and who often fell straight into the hands of Muslim slave-traders on the opposite side of the Mediterranean. Later the Templar Seneschal put great trust in him, sending him on missions to Europe to influential Templar treasurers in Paris, London and other important centres of their Order. He carried messages to rulers, barons and high-ranking church officials and returned to Templar forts under siege by the Infidel with money and gifts necessary for the upkeep of the Crusader army and fortresses and the expenses of waging war. On his third such mission, when he was on his way to the Temple in London and then onwards to Paris with a precious object in a small chest intended for the treasurer of the Parisian Templars, he sailed on a galley from Corfu towards Venice in the

company of Richard the Lionheart. They were shipwrecked just outside Aquileia and William was then captured in Carinthia only to land in the dungeon of Frederick's castle at Ptuj where he was forgotten by all and where instead of the anticipated end he was granted a new beginning.

Now the former friends sit reunited in the same room, face to face, just as they used to sit in Oxford and Paris. They look at each other in anticipation of who would be the first to speak. William cannot find the words, confused at the sight of his friend, pale and sunken into his white habit and coarse garment. When they had sat like this less than half a year ago, William had first sensed a strange combination of distance and fear in his friend, but then his body was still as robust as it used to be; now a greyed and withered man sat in front of him, all the vigour sucked out of him by the winter, nothing left for spring to rejuvenate. In the expressionless glint in Peter's eyes William can no longer recognise the young man he had roamed around Oxford and Paris with or the mature man who, apart from his last visit, had always communicated news of England in a friendly tone of voice, the fate of the knights who had murdered Thomas Becket, or how King Henry had founded Witham Charterhouse as part of his penance for the murder of his former Chancellor and friend, or about King Henry's visits to his hunting grounds near the monastery and then about his death, or how all of England had participated in collecting the money and precious metal vessels for Richard's ransom, on how the German Emperor had released King Richard from captivity, about King Richard himself who hardly spoke a word of English and his rule, about his end that came at the pinnacle of his power when all the world venerated or at least feared him, about his slow death from a wound sustained during the siege of Chalus-Chabrol Castle not far from Limoges, or about the monks at Glastonbury who claimed to have found the grave of King Arthur and his wife Guinevere, about the ever-increasing power of the Barons in England, about the disagreements between rulers and the Church, and all that made William feel like he was back on his native isle without actually having to travel there.

"I am transcribing Guigo the Carthusian," Peter broke the silence with a barely audible toneless whisper that sounded like it was being muffled in the throat by dust and cobwebs. "The path to God is an easy one," he continues in a blunt, unrecognisable voice, "one progresses along it by unloading one's burdens along the way. It would be a difficult one were we instead expected to take up burdens as we follow it. You should unload your burdens and get rid of everything and in the end renounce yourself as well." He moves his hand from his lap onto the table. William thinks he is about to reach over and touch him, but all he does is lean against the table to stand up. "I have already rid myself of everything and renounced myself," he says quietly as he turns around without his eyes or any feature of his rigid face but the dry line of his mouth moving at all. He turns around and glides out of the refectory, stooped in his greyness and sunken in the peace in which his life is imbued. William stares after him and is reminded of a scene from his memory when back in the Holy Land at the Crac des Chevaliers his Templar comrade was being placed into a stone sarcophagus. Both scenes

inseparably overlap as the image of his friend Peter dissolves through a clouded veil of teary eyes and William knows he shall never see him again.