

SAMPLE
TRANSLATION

VLADO ŽABOT
THE PEOPLE OF THE
HARRIER

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Vlado Žabot: The People of the Harrier

One evening the fire-wolf, standing on the shore, bared his teeth at a fire-wolf in the river, who bared his teeth right back at him.

“Why can’t I get inside you?” The one on dry land could not understand the river’s whispery warning. “How come he can?”

“That is no ‘he,’” whispered the river. “That is you inside me.”

“Then why does my fire not go out?” The wolf could make no sense of it. “Because here you are me,” replied the river.

1

Spirit of the River Blood,
you feed him,
he feeds you.

Almost always, when Firson and Willowson trundled out of the forest and through the muddy slushy mire across the pasture to the huts, tired and chilled to the bone, with an empty rage in their stomachs and sacks, there would be a few men just standing there, despite the rain, as if by accident, by the wall or beneath the eaves of the hut. Hairy-faced and wild-haired, they said nothing. Each one grimly staring out in front of himself, right through the two of them, none moving, none blinking, as Firson and Willowson were obliged to look up at them with due respect from beneath their brows and shuffle past with bowed heads. They just stood there in the rain doing nothing, their footwraps undone in the mud, the animal skins hanging off them, and there was a kind of surly pluckedness about them. And something wolfish in their bloodshot eyes.

You could sense the smoke of the huts in them, the hunger, the pain in their teeth and their bones, and the long-drawn-out, fickle winter, which would slacken and tauten and then after muddy, rainy thaws again and again show its icy teeth – and all of this was one and the same surliness of the gods, one and the same misery, which for several winters, several summers now, had descended on the Brotherband of the Harrier.

From the smoke in the rickety, soggy huts came the constant whine of feverish children, the coughing of old people, the irritable bickering of women. From the fold and the pigsty there was an almost fearful silence. And among the huts, in hiding more than not, were the few, most precious dogs still left.

A cold spray hung in the air. Day after day there had been a constant seeping from the sky, a swollen puckering and coating on all sides equally, a blueing into gloom, and the very same thing, gloomy and hostile and cold, was creeping out of the forest and the swamps and from people's gazes. Only sometimes, in the waning of the day, stretching out just above the edge in a narrow band it would be like embers – or dark blood – and the old men knew that the holy Sinsi would come back among the Harrier folk, and that somewhere there, beyond the gloomy curve of the edge, for the Harriers too there flowed, still and always out of itself and still and always into itself, the River Blood, sacred to all.

In the distance you could hear the rushing Temora as it thundrously carried off somewhere unknown all the last of the river ice. Through the rain from time to time a wind would blow from the swampland and stiffly shake the crow's wings on the hayloft, the bare branches in the trees, and with a rustle move across the moldering thatch roofs of the huts, and slap and snap the hardened skins across

the entryways, and remind you of the slain, of the dead, of the wrath of starry Sahush ... and of that everywhere-skulking beast, of Heka, who had still not gone, who still refused to surrender – and with whom, as everybody knew, would once more go, from the huts and from everything, what in this winter still had to go.

In all the Harrier settlements they knew the same about this.

The old men, too, who would sit with Smokestrong and with the murmurer too – smeared at this time white and corpse-like – by the firestead in front of the huts – they of course knew the same. But even so, they persisted in stoking the fire, in the rain, even in sleet, in the freezing cold, and with the arrogant sullenness of old men they watched over the holy presence of the ancestral spirits and the brotherband of the Harrier clans. It took a long time in the rain to get smoke out of the sodden logs and, as a bad omen, it kept on turning downwards to the ground. But still there was a glow. Here and there the embers in a pile of ash would start glimmering. And as it had been through many winters and disasters before now, the holy ancestor, the holy elm, would nonetheless stand firmly, nonetheless firmly endure, above the smoke and fire of the Marten clan as a sign of the brotherband of the Harrier.

Only once in a while, during the day, would one of the younger men come to sit with the silent old men, whose faces were hidden in hood-like animal skins; he would add a log or poke at the embers and look glumly up at rainy sky, at the drizzle-drenched huts, and then, right away, for comfort, for hope, at the blood pan on the big block by the trunk of the elm, in which they would soak every ax of horn or stone for battles and the hunt. But then, usually, he wouldn't know what to do – sometimes he'd just sit there all the same, just sit it out, trying to stay clear of the smoke, coughing and spitting, until finally, like the other hunters, he got up and shambled off on his own again. Without speaking. Because each of them knew his own thoughts and they all knew what was known and because in this ceaseless rain there was anyway far too much mud and gloom in their heads and far too many voices among the women and the children in the huts.

Willowson and Firson too, on Sahush night, had contributed blood to the sacred blood pan. The murmurer had made a deep cut across the left side of their chests and then set fire to half of the harrier talisman for the hunt and, with a show of reluctance, had presented each of them, for their use, with a bow and arrows for hunting fowl, a slingshot, a sack, and a small polished horn. Ever since that time, they had stayed by themselves in a special hut for the testing of youths, had avoided the women and girls of the clan, had gone out on the hunt – and like everyone before them under testing, they wished as soon as possible to shake off their fears of the trickery of Grutes and Muzegs and demons, of the wolves and the evil in the rainy swampland, and to prove themselves with prey.

It was true that, even on that Sahush night, the murmurer had shaken his head over them, as if to say they made a poor crop of youths. And many of the ordinary folk, too, believed that, with the two of them, things didn't bode well. But even in these matters the gods and the clan spirits gave and took as they saw fit. And nothing could be done about it. So, as had always been the lot of young men under testing, they were of course required to soak the arrows in the common blood pan, use the right dugout canoe, contribute prey, and get food from the hunter's skins. They could also sit with the others, when there were no women by

the fire, in the presence of the fire-carriers, the hunters, in the presence of the old men and the hunting, warring spirit in the pan – though only with their heads bowed and almost never looking up, without speaking, and on the low log for youths set a little apart, but still in the presence of Smokestrong, in the presence of the murmurer and close to the sacred Harrier fire beneath the elm, where decisions were made about everything that had to be decided on in the Marten clan. Here, as evening approached, the murmurer, with harrier feathers on his hairless head and in a martenskin cloak, would drive away demons in a wailing drawn-out voice, awaken the hunting and warring spirit from the blood pan, implore the gods, implore starry Sahush for the return of Sinsi to the brotherband of the Harrier people, adjure the dead into the flickering flames of the harrierlamps in the women's huts and send them into the River Blood. And always again and again, against the Grutes and the Muzegs, he would summon the heki-spirit into the horn and stone of the knives, of the axes, of the arrows and spears. Here, in the nights, they would listen to the spirits, the wolves, and the distant, drowning wails of the Muzegs beyond the Temora – and with few words about whether they each of them believed in his heart that no Muzeg would be so bold, that no Muzeg would dare, to cross the river and the wide swampland and come here, that even the Grutish beast, despite everything, stayed far away downstream – and all of this was how the gods had decided with the defeat of the Harriers, the defeat of Sinsi ... And here, on those rare happy days, they would perform the hunting rites, pour blood into the pan, and cut up and sort the prey.

Most of the time the two youths were allowed only to watch from the side, at a distance. But sometimes they also had to scrape the skin, quickly soiling their clothes and faces with the blood and fatty slime from the small intestines of the larger prey. And run to the foot of the hill for water. And even grab hold of something or lift something, should it happen that one of the hunters ordered them to do so with a wink. And still be quietly proud of the ancestors and the brotherband and all of it. Especially in the evenings, when in the huts of the women and children the harrierlamps of the dead would flicker restlessly and when in spite of the rain most of the hunters and old men, including the fire-carriers, would assemble nonetheless, when they filled the circle and in spite of everything you somehow felt safe. Although now, at the close of winter, when the blood spirit would hardly ever waken from the pan, and then with only a very slight smell, in this time of demons and the dead, of waiting for the harrier, the hunters and the old men were silent for the most part and, through the rain, through the smoke, would merely exchange sullen, bloodshot looks. But this waiting, this silence, also told of the bond, the brotherband in the sign of the Harrier, in the sign of the gods and all the brotherband's ancestral spirits throughout all the Harrier settlements. And Willowson and Firson knew that a true man, in good times and bad, tells the most if he is silent, if he speaks only with his face, his eyes, perhaps with a movement, a wave of the arm if need be, but certainly, when given the chance, with bow and arrows, with spear, with hornwork and stonework, with his ability for tracking or stalking, and with a skillfully silent push of the canoe, with a skillfully silent step. And of course with prey. It made you feel good to know that in the settlement Waters, too, somewhere beyond the forests upstream by the Murky River, and in the even more distant settlements of Burrows and Bearings the harrierlamps of the dead were flickering in the same way in the women's huts, that the hunters and the old men were waiting for the spirit from the blood in the sacred pan to awaken at last – that in spite of the rain they were sitting by their own murmurer, by their own Smokestrong beneath the elm and feeling the same Harrier bond, that they knew the same about Sinsi, about the Harrier, about the

blood spirit, about the crow's wings, about the ancestors and the Grutes and the demons and the Muzegs, about hunger and rain, about the cold and Heka and the River Blood, and that in their settlements too they could hardly wait for the starry hunter, for starry Sahush, with his angry disdain for the Harrier folk, to finally move beyond the hills to the south, and in these wild lands to lie with Soyka the Heavenly, the guide of wild beasts, so that sweet-smelling breezes might rise from their divine coupling and the mighty, even at times thundrous, Fiery One would finally drive away the demons, the freezing cold, the misery, and Heka. It made you feel good. Although neither the hunters nor the old men knew any kindness or comfort. But all the same in such things they could feel the sheltering presence of the ancestral spirits, who, even in times of trouble, watched over the brotherband.

When he sensed such things, Firson might now and then even feel a trembling inside him, and through the rain, from the smoke and fire beneath their noses, something from time to time would flicker in his eyes, like a pale murmurer image. While next to him Willowson usually just sat there impatiently, looking around, occasionally taking a long snotty breath, scratching himself, always fiddling with one thing or another on his clothes or in his hands, and it was obvious he wasn't much up to the kind of concentration the testing demanded when you were in the presence of the ancestral spirits and the old men and the hunters. He was older, and almost two heads taller than Firson. But thin, lanky, weak in his body, with a narrow bony face, a big truncated nose, so he looked a little birdish, and hair that that stood out from his head as if whipped about by all the winds. The old men and the hunters, too, as well as the murmurer, surely noticed that not infrequently his eyes and his head would cloud with a darkness that could not be brought to order. And this of course could not have been to their liking – and even less did they like how Willowson would often scrape something into stones, or carve something into wood, or sometimes, in the hut, softly, with that strangely sad bird inside him, pipe something on a pipe in honor of kindhearted Sooma – for this scraping and carving and piping of his, at such a time as this, could not mean anything good. Maybe they would have even looked at it, have even listened to it, if with full stomachs, like bears, and wrapped in fur skins, peaceful and warm, like bears, they could have waited for it to finally turn around, with this darkness and rain, with this winter, with this misery, as it must turn around. And kindhearted Sooma was still far away ... and once again the debased Heka, in offended rage, was making her claims and taking what was hers from Soyka the Heavenly and starry Sahush. All too many times the murmurer had set fire to dead bodies on the pyre and, beating on the skin-covered hollow tree-stump, would summon them in a mournful, wind-like, drawling voice and send them beyond the water, beyond the wind, beyond the hills, beyond the fire, into the faraway, holy River Blood – from which, for days afterward, there would be a dim confusion in the ears, a pain like a wound, a bright and heavying cloying smell in all the huts, and something cold would eat its way into the head – also about the emptiness in the storage baskets and caves and about how few breeding animals there were in the pigsty and the fold. What remained of the dead whom the murmurer burned and sent into the holy river was the ash in the pottery, and the harrierlamps of their spirits flickered in lamps in the women's huts as they waited for the Night of the Harrier.

But nobody knew how long this would last, this weather, this moldering winter, which had always taken the greatest toll. Nobody knew how long it would last before holy Sinsi returned again to the Harrier people, before the Grutish Kurivar was driven out of Burrows, and before the Grutish pillars on the Burrows mounds were pulled down.

Every day things looked bad.

And the Harrier defeat continued, the punishment continued on the Marten clan and on the entire Harrier brotherband.

Sometimes still it would snow overnight, covering the yard and the pastures, or the ground would freeze yet again and there would be ice on the tree branches. In such conditions the game would not return. In such conditions, too, packs of hungry wolves would creep up from the nearby hollows and owls would screech through the night. In such conditions, across the humble Murky River that runs right beneath the slope, the demons and the dark shadows of the old, unclean, unburned dead would crawl out of Heka's caves and move through the swampland. And in such conditions, with the aches in the chest, the bones, and the gut, death would be creeping. And nothing could be done about it. The few magpies and crows that managed to be caught during the day, and then by only the most persistent, most experienced hunters, were barely enough for the dogs. They were even running out of acorns – which anyway only made you grimace and drool when you ate them. It was looking bad. Even the keepnets, even the traps in the Murky River always came up empty, as if cursed. And people were becoming more and more convinced that, in this time of trouble, indeed, this time of clear ill fortune throughout the settlements, it would be necessary to eat even the remaining dogs and even those few pregnant breeding animals in the pigsty and the fold.

But something different happened.

Not even the oldest in the Marten clan could believe it when they sniffed at the wind and when this or that hunter talked about an entire pack of wild pigs that, in such conditions, had supposedly wandered onto the Harrier hunting grounds. The murmurer wordlessly salivated, wordlessly sniffed the wind, puffed out his cheeks and rolled wide eyes. The others mainly just shook their heads. Some saw these odors in the wind, these rumors, as a bad omen of still worse troubles to come. The old hag Kurchar, meanwhile, jangled her bones around the huts and with a sullen face mumbled warnings about the demons and the black shadows from Heka's caves. Some people, mostly women and old men, had even seen these shadows in the long rainy nights. This was not a joke. Since there really was something in the night that frightened, that confused, that wanted to put out the harrierlamps, that really whimpered, that really sighed, around the huts and in the rafters, that sometimes creaked or scratched long and hard in the wall and upset the dogs. From nearby trees, too, even during the day, came the sound of shrieks. And from the direction of the swampland the dim wailing of a beast could be heard on the wind – as if from far away, from the wild swamps on either side of the Temora or from across the dark curve of the edge of the world, many voices of the dead had come together in a single solitary gloom and evil. It made you shudder to hear it. And it was no small thing, in such conditions, when the Muzegs too could often be heard to bellow, more wildly than ever before – and with these pigs from over there ... Since during the summer and the fall they had most of the time stayed far away, deep in the swamps, maybe in Low-Oaks beyond the forest on the morning

side, which now belonged to the Grutes ... or beyond the Temora, since it so rarely happened that any of them ever became Harrier prey as well. And many people had always said that these were deceitful, unpredictably vicious creatures, who beyond the Temora and Low-Oaks mated with Muzegs and Grutes and who were more dangerous than wolves.

But hunger, at least for some of the hunters, said otherwise. True, in the first few days people thought that the pack had already escaped over the hills into the wild and it made no sense, therefore, to stalk them anywhere. Even the experienced hunters, even the fire-carriers, at first just shook their heads and concluded that sometimes something like this just happens and then is over.

But then it looked as if this time the wild pigs had not gone away after all. The wind, mainly, and the occasional, apparently fresh, dug-up grass or mud in the deeper parts of the hunting grounds seemed to say the same thing.

At this, the hunters grew more and more restless, pacing about, sniffing at the blood pan, sniffing into the wind, darting their eyes and clenching their jaws, but they didn't change their minds and only spat angrily on the ground in front of them – because, to judge by all the signs, there was something about the Grutes and the Muzegs and these pigs that was different from how it used to be

... because it was extremely dangerous to set off on a hunt for large game when you didn't know if you had permission to do so, because it was certainly godless to take from the gods at the wrong time, because it was no small thing to take much from the gods when you had to give them much in return. And because you could easily draw upon yourself the wrath of the demons and of the already-wrathful starry god.

But in the end the one-eyed, lanky Oakstrong, a fire-carrier with the mark of Bearings on his forehead, took it all on himself. Smearing himself well in watered-down dung from the pigsty, he set off by himself. He went by himself. Nor did he call one of the dogs to go with him. Even his two Bearings brothers from the Bearings hut just shook their heads over it. And stayed in the enclosure. It is true that for the sake of Oakstrong, old Smokestrong tossed a few small bundles of green plants on the embers in honor of the gods and also for good fortune in the hunt, but the murmurer, as if his stomach ached with hunger, puffed his cheeks, let out a long moan, and grimaced and drooled in displeasure. So despite the holy fire that he carried in his birchwood quiver, despite the holy smoke in the firestead beneath the elm, nobody believed they would ever see Oakstrong alive again.

But Oakstrong came back.

With a yearling over his shoulders.

Without a word, the hunters moved closer as he laid it on the sacrificial tree-stump in the sacrificial circle of the firestead. And without a word they gazed at the gray bristly creature, which even when dead displayed a ferocious stare in its eyes and two sharp tusks sticking out of its snout. They bent their heads for just a moment over the good-sized wound, still foamy with blood, beneath its left shoulder blade. But later, after Oakstrong had covered the wound in green plants, they bowed down – albeit with stiff necks – to the spirit of the slain animal and to Soyka the Heavenly in gratitude for the gift. The murmurer

rolled his eyes into the white before he blew beneath the tail of such prey and upon its spirit pronounced banishment to the wind and to the River Blood. But Smokestrong nevertheless laid greens on the embers in honor of the gods and pronounced into the gathered stillness a spell of comfort upon the banished animal spirit, that it might return in young skin, in young flesh, in young bones, that it might return into the dawn – and then, right away, to the heki of the arrow that had struck, he pronounced the thanks that were due. But the fear that Oakstrong had taken something forbidden still darkened and skewed the men's eyes – because in this time that was upon them none of the gods was giving anything good. Because the Fiery One himself remained somewhere beyond the rainy mists and even the fire in the huts or beneath the elm hardly ever, and then only reluctantly and sulkily, looked out from the smoke in the firesteads. On this occasion Smokestrong, too, was taking a long time to decide. For a long time, without a word, he bent his head into the smoke from the sputtering logs. And kept looking back and forth between the fire and the prey. Which was waiting. And making its claim. The people, too, were waiting. The hunger in their bloodshot eyes said one thing. The fear said another. The hag Kurchar stomped her feet in the mud in front of the huts, jangled her bones, and, in a pinched voice as if something was grabbing her by the throat, cast warning spells against demons and evil. The murmurer, too, he cheeks taut and his eyes still rolled back into the whites, was mumbling something holy. But Smokestrong paid no attention to either of them – and did not order that the entire prey be burned in honor of the gods and the sheltering spirits, as the old hag was demanding.

“We will eat . . .” he said at last, raising his chin. And stood up and like a wolf looked toward the swamps, at the rain, at the hag, at the huts, and then at the murmurer and at the hunters and, more quietly now, raising his chin even higher, he added, “We will be brave, we will be strong . . .” Then he lifted his arms, as if holding a big, invisible bowl above his gray, disheveled head – and everyone knew that he was promising abundant gifts to Soyka the Heavenly in thanks, and to the other gods to honor them, and to the blood spirit in the pan. The tautness in the murmurer's face relaxed. The hunters nodded their approval of these promises. And to each other – as if in a bond of debt. And then with a kind of muted gleam in their eyes, they set about cutting up the pig and, for Soyka the Heavenly and starry Sahush, for the Fiery One and kindhearted Sooma, they laid the best of the entrails, the marrow, and the thighs in front of the motionless murmurer. The head, whole and unopened, was intended for Heka, and after pounding it firmly onto a stake, the men themselves, without the murmurer, stuck it in the wall on the swamp side. For the blood spirit they added a bowl of fresh wild blood to the pan.

The harrierlamps received an abundance of fat.

The good, greasy soup that evening worked like medicine.

In the days that followed too, when – despite the hag Kurchar's mud-stomping and spell-casting – nothing bad happened to anyone in the Marten clan because of the goodness in the soup and, having smeared themselves in the proper wild slime from the pig's intestines, in the proper, wild blood, the hunters returned with yet another wild pig they had caught – everything showed signs of getting better. Although the rain didn't cease for a moment. Although the menacing, deathlike drone and wail of the wind from could still be heard from coming from the Temora, and with it, the wailing of wolves, misfortune, and the Muzegs . . . although the sky was still swollen and dark fog, cold and wolfish, still billowed forth across the slope.

But hunger slowly departed from their eyes.

It was true that many of them still showed signs of that deep-rooted fear – but even so the hunters were all the more possessed, all the more driven, all the more intoxicated by the hunt. Willowson and Firson, too. Although they could hardly extract any of the wild slime from the intestines, hardly any of the wild blood, although, being youths, they were still not permitted to go into the deep and dangerous parts of the hunting grounds. Although they could go only along the banks of the Murky River, they were still, like the others, going into the mire and the rain and shadows and the cold . . . They knew the darkly tingling tremble at spurting blood, and the summons that sent the heki into the arrows, and the fear and the restlessness – when all of this, interwoven into one, is a spell that pulls, that pledges with every step, promises, and quietly threatens, that sprays and stings, that splashes, that silently moves, that rustles, that rubs up against you or lingers nearby. From time to time came the caw of a crow. The screech of a jay. Or the rasp of a magpie, unseen, from far away . . . And in the rain, in the fog, in the misfortune was something accursed and wolfish everywhere around them, whether soaked and shivering with cold they lay in wait or plodded through reeds and slime. And sniffed for scents in the wind. Sometimes lots of water would be shaken from the bushes by something unseen. Sometimes it would creak angrily in the trees above them. Would move at the edges of their gaze – would stop for a moment, mysterious and dark, next to a tree trunk and suddenly slip away inside it or deeper into the grayness. They knew how to move without making a sound. Without speaking. How to conceal their fear, conceal their excited breathing. And even if chilled to the bone, dazed from weariness, and hungry, how to keep going – day after day to keep going and to swallow down that bitter, stubborn rage when, usually at nightfall and all too often without prey, they returned to the Marten clan.

The old men and the hunters would look at them, and would know, and would be silent. There would be no smile on their sullen faces and even less any sign of kindness or encouragement. The spirits and the gods, after all, gave and took as they saw fit. And spoke only through prey . . . Nothing could be done about it.

But nevertheless, because of the pigs, things were taking a turn for the better for the two of them too, at least at first. Almost every evening they would get soup, something greasy, and at least sometimes, some of the wild slime and wild blood. And then they could walk more easily. And before long Willowson had again shot down a magpie. And the very same day a crow. A few days later Firson had similar luck. They both felt proud of this. Felt satisfied. And in the evenings, sitting at the edge of the fireglow on the log for youths, when their prey too, at least ever so often, was now being baked and cooked in the common pot, they felt much closer, and indeed almost equal, to the others, who after all had themselves – before all this happened with the pigs – not brought in anything better.

But it was right at this time that the looks the two youths received became all the more crooked and stinging. More and more often, the young hunters in particular started watching them with long and peculiar stares.

And when later their magpies were no longer cut up into the common pot, these looks made them feel like they were sitting in nettles.

And a few days later, their crow, too, was ignored.

That evening they had no appetite for either the soup or the pigmeat it contained.

They'll see, they'll know soon enough, the youths told themselves. And just sat inside the cold hut long into the night. In his rage Firson made a pact with himself to bring in, to place upon the sacrificial log, the great wild boar itself . . . Then let them stare! Then let them know! Willowson, meanwhile, his head bowed, said nothing. And after a while he was probably no longer even asking the spirits and Soyka the heavenly for a boar. Firson in fact was sure that in that grebe-like head of his he'd very soon, once again, be straying off to kindhearted Sooma, and maybe even women . . . or else to some place all his own. Although this time it was also clear that he was not completely indifferent to these looks and the crow and the soup.

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