

He is dreaming of the dog. The sun is shining on the bay and the dog, with joyful leaps, is chasing the lines of white foam washed up by the sea.

“Father?” A voice whispers outside the hut.

He tries to hold on to the dream, the light – father, that’s what they call him now; or the old one, when they think he can’t hear them. His limbs are stiff from the cold. Is it possible that these woods are getting colder and colder?

“Are you awake, father?”

He turns on his back.

“We prayed without you.” Magnoald sounds guilty.

He didn’t hear the bell and they let him sleep. Out of prudence, consideration, fear of finding him dead on his bed. There has been an unease festering in him all night and suddenly he knows why: the woman. She claims she is coming from the island and that she has been in Luxovium, in Brigantium, Arbona, even the unholy village maybe. Now, she wants to talk to him. Magnoald must have prepared a bed for her in the barn, given her bread, mash and some of the honey that they keep for visitors perhaps. It is part of their duties to take in pilgrims, to share their food and their prayers with them. He opens his eyes and looks into the damp roof of the hut. It is not part of his duties to share his memories.

A murder of crows lifts from the treetops when Gallus leaves his hut. The sky above the woods is as grey as it was over the last weeks. The paths that lead from the dwellings of the men to the prayer house are waterlogged, the ground around them muddy. As if spring had forgotten them. The men standing under the porch of the eating house are watching him while he bends his knee before the cross in the centre of the clearing; they know that he overslept the prayers. Seven times a day I sing your praise, the psalm says. Columba held his head with indignation: Pray without ceasing, Paul wrote to the Tessonians. Seven times a day was not enough for Columba, nothing was enough. The familiar pain flashes from his hip into his thigh and makes him falter. The men in front of the eating house do not move; the woman stands beside them. Sometimes he wishes he could live alone in these woods.

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I fear he will fall, but the men beside me do not move. While I was climbing the gorge the day before I asked myself if death was waiting for me here. Like a mushroom the hermitage seems to have grown out of the humidity of the woods, only to decay the next moment. Gallus falters but then he holds on and walks to the prayer house with his head lowered.

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Open my lips that my mouth may declare Your praise. Gallus stands in the empty prayer house and repeats the words in his head. It is a long time since he has dreamed of the dog. Open my heart – the sun was glistening on the waves that washed onto the shore. Sea thrift was blooming in front of his feet, a pink cushion. It was summer. The wind stroking over the marram grass carried the sweet smell of the meadows and mingled with the sounding of the bell – it is ringing now. The door opens behind Gallus and he hears the men gathering for Terce in the prayer house.

That morning on the shore he jumped up when he heard the bell and ran up the dune as fast as he could with his seventeen years. On the crest he stopped and looked back. The dog also had stopped. For a moment they looked at each other, then the dog tuned away and continued chasing the waves. When Gallus entered the church of the abbey the prayers had long started. He tried to suppress his panting. The monks didn't take notice of him and he wondered what penance they would impose: fasting, silence, lashing? That we praise your goodness and your fairness, the men are singing in the prayer house behind him. He was lucky then. When the monks left the church none of them was thinking about his penance. They all thought about the intercession the abbot had prayed for that God might protect their thirteen companions on their forthcoming journey. Hence Columba had his will: He was leaving Bangor.

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Gallus is older than I imagined, his shoulders are bent as if his half-shaven head is weighing him down, and his arms are dangling under his robe like the limbs of a doll. But his mind seems clear. I will be able to talk to him and hear from his mouth what I want to know. I made a list of my questions, in chronological order, as if they were all of the same importance, and I will begin with Columbanus, his teacher, who must have shaped his temper, his attitude. Gallus will start talking, old men like to tell tales and I know how to listen. Alone he stands in front of the altar now with the rasping chant of the men who rather press against the walls of the prayer house than come to close to him. If he would lift his head he would tower above them all.

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II

In the corner, where the women had been sitting a candle was burning. Gallus went closer and spotted cushions and pillows. Suddenly the wine was pressing heavy on his thoughts, he was tired and he wished he could stretch out on the bed smelling of elders. It really did smell of elders, but behind it was another odour. Something moved on the cushions and he recognized the shimmering pearls. You are taller than your abbot. The fur coat rested lightly on the shoulders of the queen, underneath there was a billowing of red silk. She sat no further than a step away from him. You are a handsome man and in your eyes – she put out her hand and plucked his robe – in your eyes I see your yearning. The coarse fabric of the robe brushed over his thigh. He felt the glance of the woman on his loins and the swelling. She burst out laughing. I thought that I might come to an agreement with you as well. Gallus didn't move. What a shame the willingness of your abbot has vanished. But you – the queen leaned forward to whisper to him. But in this moment the sour odour surged up. It rose in his nose, his throat. He choked, his stomach cramped up. The soup, the wine, the furry fruit poured from his mouth.

Gallus gets up, he can no longer bear to lie down. In the darkness he stands in his hut. How did he get out of the hall that night? He doesn't know anymore, it's not important. Decades have passed and he is the only one left to remember the encounter.

Michael said the bones the workmen discovered in the foundation of the tower were from an animal. After they exposed it they built new walls on top of it. It took only a few years for the same whitish lichens to cover them. I liked the mellow scent of the walls and how the sun fell through the narrow windows into the room. I couldn't see the sea, but the river and the valley and the apple trees too further up on the slope. When the workmen had finished we carried a bottle of champagne and glasses to the tower. We hadn't considered that Lucifer could not get up the spiral staircase and sullenly he lay down on the floor beside the lowest step. Andres opened the champagne. With a faint plop the cork came loose and he filled the glasses with a pleased air. There was only one accurate way to open a bottle of champagne, as there was only one accurate time. Michael looked out of the window down to the river. As if it has always been like that, he said. It was the only time the three of us sat in the tower.

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Without waiting for Theuderich's decision Gallus left the court the next morning. Crows were sitting on the fields outside the town. Even before he reached Vesontio he learned that Columba had cast off his shackles. Like a rotten fruit, the innkeeper said, and he thought of the furry apple. A basket with a baby stood in the corner of the inn's kitchen and while the woman was talking she opened her shirt, took the child and started to nurse it. Gallus tried to take his eyes from the tiny fluff-covered head of the child sucking the breast of the innkeeper with a covetous whimpering. The sweetness of the furry fruit was on his tongue again. You are one of them, aren't you? The woman put the baby back into the basket and stood before him. Her shirt still open he could see her breasts and the blue mole on her collarbone. With a caress she pushed back his hood.

Gallus pushes the door open and lets the night air stream into the hut. He can see some stars through the branches of the trees. Is the breathing of the woods louder than usual? The kitchen, the child, the thighs of the woman, furry as the fruit – it was a dream, although over the weeks to come he felt a softness in himself.

The dream makes me jolt from my sleep. I'm standing at the river below the tower. I know, I'm not allowed to be here, I will be discovered, chased away. It is always the same dream I'm having, only the light is different, sometimes summer, sometimes autumn, mostly towards the evening. I listen for the breathing of the woman with the lacerated breasts but I can't hear it. I think of the crows that sat on the branches above the kitchen before the evening meal. Michael said there were places on the island where the two worlds meet, passages at fords, on hills or at the bottom of lakes. I asked, how they could be recognized. Only the ones they were meant for could see them, he answered. Is this why I found the hermitage?

After the first winter in the valley the years differed no more. Shortly after Christmas the tips of the snowdrops emerged from the mud beside the paths. The bright green of the alders was unimaginable every spring. Michael said they knew the fate of people and in the past sacrifices had been made in their shadow. The daffodils flowered then the apple trees further up on the slope. They carry no more fruit, Andres said, and I pretended I didn't hear it. The wild rose grew up to the window of the tower as Michael had predicted. I thought he would approve that I followed Gallus' traces after I had to leave the island. But maybe I'm mistaken. In the other world, he said, people lived in timeless oblivion.

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