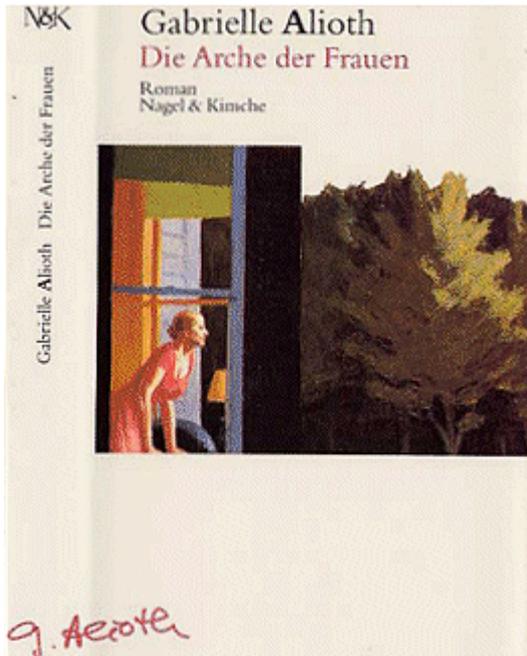


The Women's Ark



I remember seeing the valley for the first time. We had stopped on the road. There was the door, two windows in a gray wall, a narrow bridge led from the road to the house. The house was too small. The agent fumbled at the lock. When the door opened we were hit by the light. Later, whenever visitors came in and moved on to the window even before the welcoming was over, it reminded me of how I had walked through the dusty hallway towards that light, deaf to everybody's words.

Below the house lay a green carpet, a lake - I cannot describe it. Stuck in my memory blinded by a summer sun is the shape of a meadow in bloom. Was the stream really visible behind the weeds?

The water glistened. A trail led down the slope through the undergrowth. Even the agent's girl-friend had fallen silent by now. I was standing at the

chestnut tree all by myself in the sun. I can still see myself at that moment, my shape somewhat vague in the flowery dress, certainly younger, and see clearly the high grass around me, the shadows of the tree. I know that at that time the chestnut tree was no more than a stump, I know that it blossomed again only years later.

Today it seems as if I had been quite sure even then, right from the start. There is a photo with the agent's girl-friend standing on the bridge in front of the door. She's wearing a white pants-suit, sunglasses, and her mouth is blurred. I don't know who took the picture that afternoon, or why the blond woman is in it, but it's the first picture of our house, and yes, we bought it that very same evening. (p. 6-8)

At the beginning I thought we were seeing the gleaming in the stream because we were strangers, because we had found the valley. Trying to justify our choice we had succumbed to its magic. The night before we moved in I dreamt that the house was standing in woods. It was a wintry forest with smooth brown tree trunks, leaves on the ground in dim light. In my dream I knew that the sun would never reach the house, and when the tree tops would fill out in the spring it would be even more dark and damp than now. Why hadn't I noticed the woods before buying the house?

In the first months we hardly looked out of the windows. We knocked the plaster off the ceilings and froze in our jackets. In the evening we sat between wrapped pieces of furniture in front of the fireplace. Gray dust stuck in Alexander's hair. The skin of our hands was dry. The violence with which we made the house our own. When I walked down the stairs in the dark I expected to be caught like a thief who is punished with fright by the shadows. But I was curious too what they would reveal to me.

Alexander's new stairs cracked evenly under my steps, the house itself remained silent, like the wreck of a ship at the bottom of the sea. (p. 14-15)

We talked. Of course, I did not tell you everything I discussed with you in my mind. But we talked, and later we wrote.

At first I found the writing hard. Those were not the words we used: Dear Cathal, kind regards, Yours Kitty. I tried to picture you reading my letters. The unfolded sheet in your evening hands, scrubbed red with swollen joints. Each time the paper slipped your fingers, the words got blurred for you.

In the mornings, I awaited the postman's step. Occasionally, I would hear him resting his bicycle against the railings, the rattle of the handlebars against the steel rods, the sand ground under tyres. No, that was too faint but I know the sound. I heard his steps on the bridge leading into the house. I thought I should feel whether he carried one of your letters. And while running up the stairs I told myself it was unlikely. But then, I was disappointed anyway.

One time you told Deirdre that you had the same dream every night. You rushed back to your flat from the building site at lunchtime to see if mail had been delivered. I would have loved to ask you what you hoped to find. But I didn't.

I used to think that you had to yearn, to feel desperation as I did, and one day we would find out that it was the same. The crust would burst and deep inside, you would miss me as I missed you... even though you might not know, even though it was too late. It seemed so difficult to accept that you settled for different things, that you should have numb spots where I feel pain. There is always one who loves more, Polly said in the course of that first summer. I would not have minded that, had I been convinced that it could have been you. I got used to the written words. Sometimes it felt easier with your answers in my head. I wrote to you about this and that while I worked in the house and the garden. Dear Cathal...every thought set out with it. Dear Cathal: But in the end it was still missing from the letters I shoved into the envelopes at night. So very little was left over from the days.

Why are the birds not taking off?

The endless waiting. If you had been here during the first few years, we would have met every night. We would have found out that we did not match. We would have split up - or we might have got used to each other. Separation did not strengthen us, Cathal, it misled us. And when you returned...

The first moment was always the best, when you came through customs on the gangway with your eyes searching, smiling. The smile flushed hot over my face. How could the smile lie?

Yet it faded with the days passing in spite of good intentions. Eventually, I was relieved when you left again, after all the questions and the explanations. You wanted to know the whereabouts of your small saw, how much fertilizer was left and who had scratched the parlour door. Every time you spotted one of the children, you asked them where they were going. Deirdre laughed when you tried to stop her visiting the Mahons. Fergus stayed home. I had a list of things I wanted to talk through with you. But I crumpled it up before we had talked about everything. Your impatience, Cathal, all the time smoldering like a fire in wet leaves, I felt it, I smelt it and with the slightest breeze the flames could shoot up.

Life could not be delayed, Cathal, until you were ready.

I knew you from my dreams and while you were here, you remained a stranger to me. The Christmas holidays stretched out, you went into the village at night, but we stopped talking about that, too.

We avoid certain topics: Mahon's shop, fixing the big wooden gate, your departure. It seems unnecessary to sour our brief encounters.

After that Christmas we did not talk about the boys anymore. The fact that you never mentioned the incident yourself could only mean that you were still angry. And perhaps they only wanted to fix their engines in the shed. Go to the pub at night.

The marks in Patrick's face have grown more distinct. His mouth is crooked as if he was smirking. People in the village have stopped mistaking the two for each other. Fergus shuts up when one of them has a go at him and he keeps grinding the sheets of steel they hand over to him.

At some stage, we even stopped talking about the future. (p. 193-197)

She heard him talking with the men, and it seemed as if she had never understood him at all. The men were laughing. Alice wrote: "And he saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth and it repented the Lord and he said, I will destroy man from the face of the earth."

It wasn't a vegetable patch or a new fence on the back of the envelope. He wrote numbers next to the lines. Was there a moment when she realized what he was planning? Or did he tell her? He called it "the house", as if there was no other house, as if he had always known that he would build it. He was bent over the drawings on the gray paper which he brought into the kitchen on big rolls. He had to hold the edges of the sheets down on the tabletop with both hands, stretching his white neck. The collars of his shirts were loose and threadbare. When he looked up again she could see the gray of the plans in his eyes. His forehead had become rounder under the thinning hair. Could a stranger have told his age? (p.168-9)

Alice wrote: "But one walked with God and he found grace in the eyes of the Lord." That evening she understood all of a sudden that he was really going to build the house. She had seen the drawings, had heard him talk about it, and in the village the people discussed it, and yet she hadn't believed it. The young man pointed at the piles which were sticking out of the meadow here and there. Alice wrote: "The length shall be three hundred cubits, the height of it thirty cubits, and thou shalt make windows and a door..."

She wondered how it all came together, the workers, the tools, and the spring in which it hardly ever rained. She kept watching the clouds above the valley, heavy and gray they came floating from the west, sometimes hanging over the meadows for days. But not until the night did the first raindrops hit the roof. When she came out in the morning, the yard was wet and the pit full of puddles which seeped away before the men arrived. They worked every day. (p. 171-2)

She had been imagining for a long time that the house could disappear. One morning after a heavy rain the walls would be gone, the sandheap, the scaffolding, and the slope would be as green as ever. Before the elder bush unfolded its leaves they started on the rafters. She saw the white beams through the budding branches. Two workers carried the beams

into the hull of the house. Then she saw their heads above the walls, their backs bent; they moved more slowly, as if weighed down more heavily by the air up there. Perhaps they would hold the nails in their mouths like pins when hammering. After supper he would walk up the slope once more. He would be standing in front of the house looking at it. She too tried to imagine what it might look like. But the walls started bulging before her eyes, curved like ribs, and the roof billowed in the wind. It wasn't really a house. (p.173)

August

Some days I follow the river bank again up to the end of the property. On the way back I see the house standing high above the valley. It does not really belong here with its smooth roof like a sail in the sky, with its presumptuous windows, its changing faces, one scruffy and humble towards the road and one haughty looking down onto the stream.

There is a computer print-out pinned to the wall in Alexander's room with the names of previous inhabitants of the valley, some are joined by brackets, others have been crossed out. After Alexander left, I discovered our own names on it. He said: History is tied to places, and I thought of the fire in the thorns, the footsteps in the moist ground. Our life runs like water over the rocky river bed and through the bays of the valley, and it turns up the same waves, revolves in the same whirls as the water before it.

The shed is empty and full of light. The letters have vanished in the flood. There is just the head of a plaster figure left on the sill of the attic window. I have never seen it before. It is the face of a woman with a garland of curls, her eyes and her mouth painted in shrill colours, as if in mockery.

I have fixed the staircase once more even though I do not use the rooms in the upper floor any more. My sleep is peaceful and in my dreams the animal runs across the overgrown slopes of the valley. At times, I think of the years we spent here together, of Alexander's shape down by the river, when he was still pruning the shrubs or when he crossed the yard with the barrow. His blond hair turned paler during the summer. The images linger.

It was not his back at the bottom of the steps and probably not the old man's either. I am trying to sense the void underfoot, after the splintering of the steps, and then an acute pain. At this moment, they say, everything we ever saw runs past us one more time, and perhaps what we merely imagined, too.

On the day after the last flood I stood by the kitchen window. It was a clear morning and a white fog hovered between the sally trees. The sky above it was colourless as before sunrise. The stream ran out of the meadow back into its bed. The boulder in the bank stuck out a bit and the water arched in a flat wave around it, flowing past its sides. The bright sky was reflected in the current and I felt as if it carried something with it. Next winter, I believe, I will see the kingfisher. (p. 218-220)

(Translated by Jutta Ittner and M. Alioth)