

ENGLISH TITLE

The Alder Mound

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Haltzaren muinoa

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ALDER HILL

IT RAINED all night, poured, torrentially, determinedly. All the next day too: it rained and rained all day long, as if the curtains of heaven had split from side to side. In all that time, it did not stop raining for a single moment, and it doesn't look like it will ever stop.

Inevitably, the waters coming down from the mountains are getting faster and stronger, and the river is rising, swelling, overflowing.

No one is walking along the other side of the river. Firefighters' sirens may be heard at any time of the day. Shortly after an alarm goes off, a fire truck comes down the road on the other side of the river, red warning lights turning around and around. The fire truck makes waves in the puddles, which are getting bigger and bigger by the hour.

The water has taken over the land completely. It has flooded the orchards, and ruined the fields behind the bushes that surround the alder tree.

A CAR FROM THE TOWN HALL has arrived at the alder. Orders are given through a loudspeaker to the people in the villas and to the farmers:

"Floods are coming. Barricade your huts and storehouses, seal the stable doors, reinforce the kitchen doors too with planks and sandbags."

The car is stuck in a big puddle and can go neither backwards nor forwards. The loudspeaker keeps giving orders:

“If water enters the house despite all precautions, go up to the attic and, if necessary, out onto the roof. Do not leave the house. In case of an emergency, call the town hall or the local police.”

The car from the town hall is still stuck. The driver gets out of the car anxiously and walks awkwardly. The water is up to his waist. He sets off for the villas with difficulty, leaving the car behind. The driver trips and falls on his face into the water, which would have carried him away had he not grabbed onto a bush by the side of the road. He pushes through the bushes, through thorns and branches, and barely makes it to a field that is higher than the walkway.

The car’s loudspeaker is still giving orders from the middle of the puddle, which is getting bigger and bigger:

“The worst will come in two hours, with the high tide. Please follow orders. Even if the rain stops, continue to be cautious as the storm can still cause major damage.”

The car starts to move in the water, slowly at first, then faster. Caught in the water, it soon disappears from the alder’s sight.

The sound of the loudspeaker comes from farther and farther away:

“Floods are coming. Barricade your huts and storehouses, seal the stable doors, reinforce...”

SUDDENLY, the alder tree starts to sway, it staggers like a drunkard, but there is no wind. The roots have begun to quiver, but there is no sign of an earthquake. What there is, is rain. Rain and more rain. Buckets of rain. And it’s not stopping.

The alder staggers again. Soon, the trunk creaks as if it has begun to split in half. After the creak, the alder lets out a kind of sigh:

“Oh, shoot!”

It staggers a third time. It looks like the tree will fall on top of the bush. Or into the river.

A woodpecker, frightened, flaps its wings quickly and flees its refuge in the tree. It says goodbye to the alder with a flutter of its wings:

“Goodbye, goodbye, I’m leaving! Give my regards to the storm!”

THE ALDER HAS NO WINGS, no feet, no way to flee the storm.

It is terrified. It doesn’t understand what’s going on. The roots of the alder, which were so well rooted, begin to move. They’re wriggling in the mud, now here, now there, like horrible long worms.

The alder looks down. The soil around its roots, already pure mud because of the rain, has started to slide down the hill.

The alder too has begun to slide with the soil, teetering, ever so slowly, ever so softly. It can’t keep its balance. At one point, the leaves go flip, the roots go flop, the trunk goes pop.

The alder lies deep in the mud for a long, long time.

It looks like an oil tanker that has cracked in two, dirty and black all over.

The landslide has gained strength in a very short time and the trench in its wake is getting wider, to the left and to the right. The landslide has taken a large

bite out of the river bank, many yards long, maybe even the size of a large field. Moving slowly, the chunk of land slides into the water.

With it go a large piece of grassland, bushes, the alder.

LYING ON THE MUDDY CHUNK OF LAND, the alder also slides down the mud, gently, very gently, as if sliding down a comfortable slope. When it reaches the river bank, it goes splat! right into the muddy water. The softness of the mud first and then the coolness of the water leave a sweetness like that of a lotion on the alder where a boy carved a heart.

“This is cool! This is fun! Free at last!”

The alder has never lain down before, has never felt such softness.

“The water will take me down the river and I’ll see the world!”

The alder is overcome with joy.

But after joy comes sadness: there is mud all along the river bank and the tree has stopped in a muddy meander, half submerged, moving neither backwards nor forwards, unable free itself from the mud.

You have the chance to travel, you make it to the river, and instead of floating downriver, you slide into the mud!

WITH THE TIDE, the waters have risen higher and higher, and little by little, the alder has begun to free itself from the mud.

What would happen to the alder next, miracle or misfortune?

Of the two possibilities, it was the miracle that happened: with the ebbing tide, the alder too has set off downstream, moving slowly at first, then more easily. Its entire trunk is covered in mud. Even the leaves in the crown of the tree, which are naturally very green, are now dripping mud: you would never guess it was a tree floating down the river.

“So what? I got what I wanted. What have I got to complain about?”

The alder doesn’t care about the mud!

“It’ll take more than this to stop me from seeing the world.”

Besides, the weather is clearing up after the last four days of pouring rain, and there’s no wind. The sun is playing hide-and-seek behind the clouds. It doesn’t seem to trust the rain.

Everything is going right for the alder, and it moves slowly and calmly down the river, floating as easily as a Venetian gondola. Much faster than before, it moves gracefully, faster and faster, faster and faster...

It’s loving every minute.

The leaves splish and splash on the surface of the water, as if they wanted to wash the mud off themselves in the spatter.

The sound of bells, from somewhere far away. The sounds on the alder’s hill were much quieter.

THE RIVER IS BECOMING WIDER and wider and the landscape has changed dramatically: the trees have thinned out on both the left and right sides of the river, there are more meadows and cultivated fields, and farming domes and mechanical workshops can be seen from time to time, but the river now looks like a serious torrent of water...

The leaves have begun to tremble, probably bumped by a wooden fruit box on the water. It floated right up to the tree and collided with its roots. There were some books in it, but the box overturned with the impact and most of the books fell in the water. But three or four of them remain, trapped in the roots.

“They need Tomas’ books!” the leaves were heard to say.

The alder suddenly recognizes *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *Treasure Island*, two of the books trapped in its roots. They’re soaked, ruined, and first one, then another, then the rest of the four fall into the water and quickly sink due to the weight of the wet paper.

The alder is grieved to the red resin in its guts to see the books lost like that and it feels very bad for Tomas too, because the waters took the books he loved so much.

LAST SUMMER, almost every afternoon, Tomas would go to the alder and sit on the grass with his back against the tree trunk. Each time he showed up, the boy brought a different book in his red backpack: once, it was the one about Tom Sawyer’s adventures; another time, it would be *Robinson Crusoe*; the next time, he would take a biography of Catherine of Erauso out of his backpack; and another time, Stevenson’s *Treasure Island*.

Tomas generally read out loud, all about the deeds of the pirates, sailors and adventurers in his books:

“Fifteen men on a dead man’s chest. Yo-ho-ho and a bottle of rum!” sang Tomas when he was reading *Treasure Island*.

Two or three days later, he would appear with another book:

“Within two minutes, or even less, Tom Sawyer had forgotten all his troubles.”

The alder wishes it had the courage and *joie de vivre* of the heroes in Tomas' books. Sometimes it wants to be a pirate, sometimes a sailor, sometimes an adventurer. Since the alder first started down the river, it too has "forgotten all its troubles" just like Tom Sawyer, and it has no intention of quitting its journey now.

THE ALDER didn't miss a single one of Tomas' words, it liked hearing his voice. Some of the sounds were soft, some were loud, or happy, or made the alder sad. And when Tomas said a word that the alder had never heard before, the tree started to think about its meaning and with the help of the other words that Tomas said, it imagined what the word could mean. For example, the alder had heard the word *explosion* many times, but it did not understand what it meant until it heard *explosion* in connection with thunder

"The explosion of thunder did not frighten Catherine of Erauso," Tomas read aloud.

The alder drew its conclusions:

"What about the thunder would frighten Catherine of Erauso? The sound, the noise, of course. The explosion!"

AS HE HAD MANY TIMES BEFORE, Tomas was reading, sitting with his back against the alder's trunk. At one point, he started reading out loud from the book in his hand:

"I ordered the sailboat to be prepared. The sailor did not understand me.

"You know nothing about the sea..."

“Before the sailor could finish his sentence, I headed for the port with the sailor on my heels. I hoisted the boat’s sails, I untied the ropes that lashed to boat to the quay.

“Thunder rolled in from the sea.

“‘Where are you going?’ the sailor asked me worriedly.

“‘I don’t know,’ I answered. ‘I want to leave here and travel the world.’

“‘But what port will you sail for?’

“‘Listen carefully and try to understand,’ I answered. ‘Leaving here and traveling the world is all the port I’m looking for.’

The sea, the sea, forever rebegun!

Paul Valéry

THE ALDER’S GOAL IS TO REACH THE SEA and it does not want to give up.

“Yes, I’ve got to leave here and travel the world, seeking my port.”

What the alder has in front of it and the small world it left behind have nothing to do with each other. Now, down the calm waters it goes, down between unknown banks, with great delight, leaving a joyous foam in its wake.

Everything is new to it, everything is different. Like the sea. One of the poems that Tomas read aloud said that.

The river carries the alder, the river carries flotsam from the mountain waters and the rain, down a channel carved in the earth by nature over centuries and

centuries. The river has adapted to the nature of the land and, in places where nature is steep, the river falls as if on a slide, almost leaping. In flat spaces, on the other hand, the water moves more calmly, it seems sleepy.

Down the path of centuries the alder glides.

To the open sea, which is always the same because it is always different.

THE ALDER FLOATS through beautiful plains to both its left and its right, never before seen, and every once in a while, there's a lovely surprise. A miracle like a great gleaming fish jumping from water to air, for example.

The leaves in the crown splash their applause for the fish's graceful leap.

As soon as the fish disappears, silence falls, a heavy silence. The river has started to narrow and there is no longer any vegetation on its banks, only rocks, bigger and bigger. The alder has no other way to pass between the two tall stone walls. The walls are tremendous, completely vertical. Hardly any light reaches the narrowing gorge the alder has just entered, meeting livelier and foamier currents.

In an eddy in the white water, a rock emerges, not far from the wall, with a sharp, menacing point like a harpoon's.

"Red resin of my guts, what kind of branch is that sticking out of the water?"

The current carries the alder directly onto the rock. Even if the tree could do something, it would be useless: there is no way to avoid the collision.

"Give up, alder, you're done for, there's nothing you can do!" says the roar of the rapids to the tree.

THE CROWN OF THE ALDER ran straight into the rock and rebounded against the vertical stone wall. The two blows were huge. Some branches cracked off the crown and the tree lost a lot of leaves in the two collisions. Then the waves carried branches, twigs and leaves through the gap between the two rocks and into the open river, each to make its own way downstream.

The alder, however, had come to a halt. Its crown was stuck between the rocks, its trunk was battered and bruised, and it was in danger of losing its roots.

The alder is in pain from the blow; the alder is in pain because of its lost branches; the alder is in pain because it's stuck between the rock and the giant stone wall and can move neither backwards nor forwards.

The last is the worst: it looks like it might be stuck there forever; it looks like the alder might suffer the same fate as the many wooden boxes, oars, chairs, barrels, planks, large eel nets and vineyard stakes carried downriver by the flood: it will die and rot between the rocks.

DUSK has brought a change in the direction of the wind and you can hardly hear the hooting of an owl, the barking of a dog...

The alder is used to the silence of the night, but not used to being trapped between two large stone walls. Moreover, no light falls between the rocks. There is weight in the passage of time, in the alder's situation, in the darkness...

The alder spent over forty years in the same place it was born, and has spent only five or six hours stuck between the rocks. It has lost its newly won freedom, and is frustrated in the pleasure it had begun to take in traveling.

The alder's situation is not what it had hoped for...

There was a sigh in the darkness.

“For this I abandoned my hill?!”

Suddenly the moon broke through the fog, white as milk, casting light on the rocks and brightening the river with silvery sparkles.

But as light casts a shadow, so misfortune follows happiness. The alder felt sharp teeth in the middle of its trunk. Crunch-munch, crunch-munch. It hurt a lot, unlike the peck of the woodpecker.

“A beaver!” The alder is afraid.

Now the biting stops as suddenly as it started: the beaver, or whatever it was, must not have found anything to its liking in the alder’s battered trunk and must have gone looking for tastier food among the debris scattered by the flood.

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BRUUUMMMMMMM!

What's going on? Where is that rumble coming from?

The sound is like the explosion of thunder, but louder than the loudest thunder, longer than the longest thunder. One, two, three minutes. The thunder sound is getting closer, the roar coming down the river is very heavy and so dense it almost silences fear itself.

Where and how was it created, this enormous mass of sound bearing down on the alder? What kind of power must it have to gather everything around the river in its lap?

It's an enormous wave that seizes the river from one side to the other!

"Is it possible to have another flood right after a flood? Is it possible to have so many accidents and mishaps in such a short time?" The leaves, trunk and roots of the alder are terrified.

Yes, it's possible.

Against all logic, the water comes tumbling a second time: a few hours earlier, due to the rain; now, who knows why?

The second comes through even more powerfully than the first. It's a huge wave a couple of yards long that comes down the river in a great mass of water. Foaming, at incredible speed, pushing everything in its path before it as if it were lighter than a feather.

And even the tree is as helpless as a bird's feather in what comes next.

Bruuummmmmmmmm!

NOT FIVE MINUTES had passed since the alder first heard the roar when the wave struck it full on. The water had more power than the meanest wind, and the wave forced the tree out from between the rocks, almost throwing it in the air, ripping off some of the roots, leaving the trunk with terrible cuts, scratches and cracks and destroying many twigs and leaves in the crown.

The impact of the water tumbled the alder, then left it lying with the carved heart facing the sky.

It all happened very quickly but at the same time, it was very intense. As if the entire universe had passed over the alder tree.

Breaks, bruises, bumps, cuts... Now that the alder has made it past the terrible stone passage, everything hurts; pain is the master of the tree.

Additionally, the alder has lost a considerable part of the crown that connected it to the sky. It has also lost many of the roots that connected it to the earth.

The alder's condition is not at all what it was two days ago when it began its journey; nor is the tree anything like as sound.

However, all in all, it has reason for consolation: it's alive and has lost neither the desire to see the sea nor the joy of adventure.

A HELICOPTER in the sky. It comes from the sea, flying up the river. It's very low in the sky, not at all the right height to measure the destruction brought by the flood.

At one point, the helicopter hovers a little above the alder, with a great deal of noise. It turns its blades at tremendous speed, kicking up the water like crazy around the alder. The tree sways left and right, sometimes on the crest of a wave, sometimes in the abyss of another.

The helicopter pilot and co-pilot have been looking out their windows for a little while. The pilot points with his finger.

A small door opens in the belly of the helicopter and a rescue ladder, similar to the ladders circus acrobats use in their performances, is lowered. It stops two yards from the top of the alder, swaying back and forth.

Until a woman appears at a small window on a roof, waving wildly to draw the helicopter's attention and carrying a bird that can hardly be seen under her other arm.

It must be a chicken. Or a capon.

A man in red overalls comes down the ladder, wearing a harness tied at his waist and between his legs. The man and the woman start talking, the woman from the roof and the man with both feet on the last rung of the ladder and hands holding onto the sides. By the look of things, the woman is not happy and she shakes her head no and gestures with her free hand.

Finally, she gives the chicken or capon or whatever it is lots of kisses and leaves the animal on the roof.

THE MAN takes a harness from his back and puts it on the woman, not without difficulty, since the ladder is blowing around a lot and the woman is afraid to climb into the sky.

“No. No, sir. I can't climb that thing. How many times do I have to tell you?”

“Don't worry, just keep your eyes on me and everything will be fine, you'll see.”

“What about poor Polentxi?” says the woman, pointing to the chicken, capon or whatever it is.

“I’m sorry, but he’s going to have to stay behind.”

He starts up the ladder. The woman holds on tight to the man; the man’s hands strain to keep a grip the bars on the sides of the ladder.

“Goodbye, Polentxi, good boy, I’ll be back soon. Be good!”