

ENGLISH TITLE:

The Pig

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ORIGINAL TITLE:

Zerria

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*The creatures outside looked from pig to man,
and from man to pig, and from pig to man again;
but already it was impossible to say which was which.*

George Orwell, *Animal Farm*

1.

The news shocked me. It reminded me of a man who once shot an eagle in flight. The hunter was unnerved to find that the bird had the decaying skull of a weasel stuck to its neck. Apparently, the eagle had attacked the weasel, but the mammal, twisting in its extremity, had sunk its teeth into the eagle's neck.

Perhaps the bird would have reacted by taking flight and the weasel would have found itself suddenly airborne, a furry stole, alive and hoping to be released. In that case, predator and prey would have made a wondrous sight as they rose through the sky.

But it is also possible that the eagle pecked the weasel to death on the ground, skinned it with its talons and removed its entrails as best it was able. In that case, the eagle would have had to live with the decaying skeleton, in the sky and on land, until nothing remained but the timeworn skull of the weasel in its neck until the hunter finally shot it down.

That was me from the moment I first received news of the discovery, for the news had teeth and talons that pierced me to the depths, and dragged me away.

“Bereket!” It was Gaspard on the phone, upset as he told me the news. “I found some bodies on the Tsanfleuron glacier, mummified, at least two of them. There are some artifacts with them too. Come quickly, before the police get here!”

I had heard the story of three sisters who had been caught in a snowstorm in the French Massif Central, in the heart of the Margeride. They were on their way home from a dance and had frozen to death, huddled together with their dog. Since then, the place has been known as Three Sisters Pass (*Le Col des Trois Soeurs*). I had heard older stories as well, such as tales of the mummified Ötzi or Similaun Man, killed with an arrow in the Alps between Austria and Italy. Or, from farther afield, stories of mountain climbers frozen to death on their way to the peaks of the Himalayas, monuments to the feats of brave men now corpses

forever. And I had also heard of the bodies of miners preserved not by ice but by the effluvia of copper vitriol in mines in various places. But Gaspard's news and the proximity of the location of the bodies took me by surprise and rattled me.

October was coming to an end, as was the afternoon, and I was working on the Rhône glacier. Not far from the place of discovery, that is. I don't know what excuse I gave to my glaciologist colleagues, but I remember that I couldn't leave fast enough for Tsanfleuron.

In those impressive surroundings, driving along the winding road, I remembered the writer Johann Wolfgang Goethe. He too had wandered those icy landscapes to see the "chasms of blue vitriol" for himself, perhaps in the hope that nature would help him to take the true measure of man. Or perhaps with the idea that the labyrinth of humankind could be better understood from above. In either case, his ambitions were of the highest, and artistic. But it was clear that the ambitions of Tsanfleuron's dead were more prosaic: they had most likely gone out in search of livestock – sheep, goats, or cows – and, like the three sisters, had been caught in a blizzard, trapped in the snow... until today. Another discourtesy of life. Goethe could have written that the landscape was made of glass – of sugar, perhaps – but for the lost couple, it turned out to be made of salt.

In less than half an hour, I was on the tongue of the glacier, and even before I got out of the car, I saw Gaspard in the parking lot, waving at me to hurry up. *Vite!*

"A photographer is on his way. Come on, Bereket! We'll be the first to examine the site. *Schnell!*"

Most glaciers are in the process of melting; like sugar cubes in hot milk, they're breaking up, with great creaks and cracks. In their death throes, paradoxically, they've left several bodies exposed, in the whitest of cemeteries. A gift, perhaps, for those of us who love these masses of ice.

Gaspard and I were privileged witnesses, and we identified two bodies: entwined strands of brown and gray hair, a cloak, pieces of cloth, and limbs in impossible postures, possibly the result of fractures caused by an avalanche.

“What’s this...?” we heard suddenly. “What is all this?” The photographer had just arrived. We were so captivated we hadn’t even noticed him.

After chipping away the ice a little more with a shovel, we found another body, but this one made us hesitate: they could be human remains, but perhaps it was a Pyrenean mountain goat or a roe deer. Lowering his voice, Gaspard told me that in his opinion the remains looked disconcertingly human but had no clothes, so it could also be a bear. The photographer’s voice rang out again.

“Surely they were being chased by a wild boar,” he concluded confidently, casting further doubt upon our hypothesis of an avalanche.

In any case, in that totemic, almost sacred place, three objects were found with the mortal remains: a pocket watch, stopped at the fateful hour of 6:43 a.m. or p.m., a green glass bottle and a small book tightly wrapped in cloth. These objects were further evidence that the remains were human.

“Could I take the book, Gaspard?” I asked my dear professor, looking at him with puppy eyes. “It’s making me very curious. I’ll take better care of it than I would of my own children.”

The police had just arrived and the blue-green lights of their car met the photographer’s white flashes, merging to destroy the darkness.

“All right, but you have to have it back here in its place tomorrow, before the work begins,” Gaspard agreed.

I couldn’t have known that the discoveries had only just begun. I couldn’t have known that the news had already sunk its teeth into me. Or that it would never let me go, like an eagle with a weasel or a weasel on an eagle’s neck.

2.

“Are you with us?” At dinner there was no other topic of conversation among the glaciologists: the two bodies, the presumed animal, their unfortunate end, sweet death by freezing. But Gaspard had once more understood my state of mind. Ever since the discovery had sunk its teeth into me, I had held onto the book as a relic and it seemed to me that it could be the key to solving the mystery of the dead couple. I longed to open the pages and read it carefully, as they would have.

Ever since Professor Gaspard and I met at the University of Geneva, we have been united by a common passion. He’s energetic and idealistic and, were it not for the crepey skin that betrays his age, seen from behind, one could mistake him for a slender young man. It was the cold that led to our warm relationship. Ice. With him, I learned the art of placing a stethoscope on the surface of the earth, as if our ears meant to listen to nature.

“What happens when water turns to bone? What is a glacier? Basically, it’s a solid narrative of all of time, like tree rings, but we cannot yet read that alphabet properly. We are watchmakers because we work with time, we are astrologers because we study the sky from the earth and, precisely because of this, we are also geologists.”

Gaspard would say things like this, and I would say to myself that we were also chromatologists, because we were looking for the brightest colors. “To the Absolute North” was our motto. We need the cold to be able to live. Memories. Confessions. Nature’s and our own.

As a boy in Cologne, Gaspard was given a glass ball with a fir forest inside it, and a hut and an old woman chopping firewood. When the ball was shaken, large snowflakes appeared in the watery interior and the green landscape turned to flour as winter advanced in a slow storm. Gaspard was one of few children in Cologne who could enjoy snow even in the middle of summer.

As a child, when I was brought from Addis Ababa to Annecy in France, in the foothills of the Alps, I was fascinated by my first snowfall. Enchanted, I managed to capture a snowflake in a mother-of-pearl box. I immediately put the precious box in the freezer with my diamond inside it. I was the only little girl in Annecy who could see snow even in the middle of summer.

Despite our difference in age, since we became co-workers, Gaspard and I have learned to love the Scottish artist, Katie Paterson. Paterson made a number of recordings on Iceland's Vatnajökull glacier, but is known above all for connecting a live phone to the ice permanently, giving us the opportunity to hear the heartbeat of a glacier in the absolute north any time and from anywhere.

We also enjoy the work of Canadian researcher and musician Carmen Braden, who made recordings in frozen lakes at 40 degrees below zero. It's beautiful to hear cryophonies recorded with a hydrophone and a Zoom H4 recorder: the creaks, the cracks, the heartbeat of the ice, the jingles. And we love the instrumental works Braden created based on those recordings, like *First Frost* or *The Ice Season*.

For all these reasons, we loved glaciers, even though we were aware that it was that white world that had claimed the lives of those two people. But I also had a book waiting for me in my room. A relic. Like my snowflake. And that's why Gaspard repeated what he had said earlier. Because I had an urgent matter that consumed my mind like wildfire.

"No, you're not with us."

3.

I settled myself on the bed cross-legged and placed the book tenderly on my lap, almost as if it were a newborn. I carefully removed the tattered cloth that bound it and there on the brittle pages I read “the Holy Gospel of Jesus Christ, according to John” and, to my disappointment, in smaller letters: “Translated from the Vulgate Latin into the Basque of Labourd by Captain Duvoisin. London, 1859.” I had hoped to find a diary, the testimonies of the deceased, a sketch. But it was clear that the text came from the New Testament and that I would not be doing any intimate archaeology. At best, I would have content myself with the thought that the book might have been like a lamp for those people lost in the mountains, a warm fireside before they died.

The language was also foreign to me, but the reference to Labourd and especially the reference to the Basque language revealed the origin of the book. Two or three years earlier, I had been invited to a summer course in Bayonne. The always enigmatic Pays Basque. Under the aegis of an organization with the mysterious name of Euskaltzaindia, I landed in Bayonne in Labourd to participate in a conference on languages. I don’t know how they came up with my name, but my task was to explain the language of snow and ice; semantics, that is. I flew to Biarritz, where I was met by Pettan, who was a professor at the University of Pau. And that by itself made it all worth it.

I could draw only two conclusions about the glacier event: the victims could have been of Basque origin, and the accident must have occurred in or after 1859. But perhaps I could also draw a third conclusion: they cherished the book, they were believers and the book would have been a comfort to them. Somewhat disappointed, I remembered the amazing expeditions to the Poles and how the wooden ships were often trapped in the ice. How could anyone forget the story of the *Endurance*? Robert Falcon Scott’s expedition was also caught captive by the glass landscape and to make the endless nights more bearable, they read books aloud, *David Copperfield* and *The Decameron*, among others.

Before going to bed, I wanted to take one last look at the book, turn through its pages one more time before returning it to the glacier first thing in the morning. Then I noticed that some letters, syllables and words in the first chapter were underlined, as were a few numbers. It was probably an absurd hunch, but I remembered that Captain Scott had once killed a crow and, having run out of ink, used its blood to be able to keep writing in his diary. And whether or not it would turn out to be an absurd hunch, I picked up my notebook and began to copy that unintelligible sequence of letters, syllables, and words. I had a feeling that I was dealing with an encrypted message, but I was still illiterate, unable to interpret its meaning.

After my stay in the Basque Country, Pettan and I kept in touch by mail. We wrote letters to each other, and reading his eagerly was like savoring an excellent Gewürztraminer white. Though the wine would be cold, our missives were warm. However, we hadn't met in person again since then. Perhaps carried away by all this, it occurred to me to write to him and ask for his assistance.

So, this time by email, I told Pettan that the glacier had spoken to me again and asked for his help, begged for it: I needed him by my side to better understand the message of the ice. Unable to find rest even at that ungodly hour of the night, I sent him the indecipherable words I had copied out with photos taken on my phone.

in the beginning~all things were made by him~in him was life; and the life
was the light of men~in darkness~and darkness~there was a man~whose name was
John~the same came~to bear witness~he was not
that light~in Harane~and the world knew him not~the pig is
come~of blood~of the will of the flesh~of the will of man~the only
begotten~and cried~swine~have we all received~and
truth~no man hath seen~this is the record~to ask him,
Who art thou?~and denied not~I am not~What then? Art thou~murderer~the
Pharisees~and the pig~Why baptizest~boar~whom ye know not~coming after

me~is preferred before me~dead~baptizing~the lamb~the sin~After me cometh
a man which is preferred before me~he should be made manifest¹

I sent him the message and waited, burning with impatience. Perhaps Pettan
would be able to see my snowflake in the mother-of-pearl box.

¹ See the appendix at the end of this book for a clearer view of how the message was composed.

4.

I was the first to leave the inn, setting off without even having breakfast. It was cold, but the sky was starry, graced with a crescent moon, and the depth and immensity of the heavens were extraordinary. I was overcome by an aesthetic twinge, somewhat like Stendhal's syndrome, and also felt unsteady.

In the sleeping salt landscape, the location of the bodies had been cordoned off by the police, but I was able to replace the book easily. Soon the police car appeared, with the glaciologists' jeep right behind it, followed by another car with the medical examiner and the archaeologists.

For centuries, wine, furs, cereals and salt were transported through the Furka pass. The thought of salt reminded me of something that had been mentioned at a conference of glaciologists: weasels apparently have a fondness for salt. A few had even been seen sniffing through our materials, licking the handles of ice axes and pickaxes, tasting the grips. But the weasel also likes human sweat, or the nipples of a sleeping girl, especially right after sex.

I left that salty landscape to return to my own sugary landscape, to place my stethoscope on the surface of the Rhône glacier and decipher the DNA of the world. And it's strange, but I felt a kind of warm caress come to me from the soles of my hiking boots, up my legs, over my sex, my stomach, and my chest, until it settled on my heart. It's difficult to explain.

In any case, the fact that the exhumation teams would be working on recovering the bodies was very much on my mind all day, and of course I could not forget that Pettan might offer to help me interpret the coded message. At the end of the day's work, instead of returning to the inn, I went to the village of Hospental in search of information, and then to Andermatt, straight to the library, not knowing exactly what I was looking for.

"Newspaper archives, reports," I stammered to the kind librarian. "Maybe a list of missing persons..."

“Like the ones on Tsanfleuron...?” He replied with a question. “The TV guys beat you to it. They just left.”

The librarian fetched me a copy of an issue of the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* from November 9, 1888: “White snow is black.” Although the date was helpful, the article reported nothing more than the disappearance of a woman and a man in the St. Gotthard area. But there was an astonishing detail: “They were accompanied by a bear and may have been puppeteers or acrobats.” The article added that it had been snowing hard all week and that rescue teams in the canton of Uri had not been able to go out. Another couple lost forever in white tranquility.

I thanked the good librarian warmly for the information and took my leave. Maybe now I could make some progress. I went straight to the church, looking for the priest. I entered in the middle of Mass, and both the singing and the prayers transported me to the Middle Ages of my personal history. I felt comfortable in spite of everything, and as the priest was saying goodbye to the five or six parishioners, I did not hesitate to ask him about the mummified bodies.

“I’m afraid I can’t help you. You might try the church in Wassen, in St. Gotthard... It’s up in the mountains.”

I didn’t hesitate for a moment and, just as I had run to Tsanfleuron the day before, I left immediately for Wassen. I set off in a hurry, so absorbed with it all that the sound of the phone startled me and I gave the steering wheel a sharp jerk.

“Bereket, ne... News.” I was thrilled to hear Pettan’s voice. And surprised. But gaps in coverage interfered again. “You’re not going... to believe...”

I couldn’t hear anything else, and kept driving up the road with my heart pounding. Suddenly, I went around a bend and the church of Wassen appeared before me in the middle of a fir forest, like a lighthouse at sea. And the lighthouse keeper seemed to be waiting for me, sitting on the porch smoking a pipe.

“I’m Heinrich. Mass just finished,” he informed me irritably, scolding me for my lateness. But once I explained to him who I was and what had brought me there, he treated me cordially.

He entered the church through a side door and soon returned, holding out a large leather-bound book. The pages were written in different hands and listed births and baptisms, communions, weddings, deaths and funerals for the year 1888. But toward the end, an Addendum listed Visits, Accidents and Persons Missing in the Mountains. And there were the teeth and talons of the previous day’s news, sharper than icicles. There was the record of the accident.

5.

Yesterday, after evening prayers, as we were about to retire to our cells, we were surprised to hear someone knocking at the door of the church. I went to the door accompanied by a seminarian, and when I opened it, I saw two wretched souls, beclouded by snow. I looked at them more closely and saw that they were a man and a woman dressed in old clothes, their rags steaming. But, above all, my incredulous eyes spied a bear that the man was hiding behind him...

“Shelter for one night, I beseech you,” the man begged me. “Belphegor will stay in the stables. Don’t be afraid. He has a better heart than many humans.” And since it is our duty to welcome and shelter the helpless without question or qualm, we brought them into the church.

Where could they have come from? They had arrived exhausted and nearly dead from the cold, and starving, but can there be a starving person who will not eat? Though they needed shelter more than sustenance, they drank their garlic soup slowly, almost without appetite. Seeing that they were not replenished, I asked the seminarian to prepare mulled wine and soups. They needed to drink to restore their spirits. But perhaps in addition to refuge, they sought the warmth of faith; indeed, they told us that they would like to visit the church before going to bed.

The strangers had come to us at an odd hour of an untimely season, accompanied by a bear, and seemed to be hungry though they had no appetite. But when we arrived at the chapel of St. Anthony, the woman suddenly took fright and ran out as if beset by the devil. We found her sitting next to the bear, beside herself, and the husband made her excuses as best he could: they were husband and wife, they had suffered terrible times and their only goal was to reach Rome, they were emissaries on their way to the Vatican.

The next day the weather took a turn for the worse, but the travelers wanted to cross the St. Gotthard pass at all costs, before the snowfall became heavy.

They were convinced that once they reached Italy, they would be only a step away from Rome, and especially from the Vatican.

They went from us and disappeared into the snow. Among the crags, the sight of the bear frightened a friar who crossed their path nearly frozen on his way to us from Airolo, in Italy. He recovered in the warmth of the fire, but we heard no more of the couple. The snow that had begun to fall so softly, so silently, turned into a hellish blizzard that kept us captive in the church for a full week. After the storm had passed and we were able to go looking for the couple, we found no trace of them but the leash for the bear.

It is curious: the landscape was truly beautiful and wondrous, but our souls remained *in tenebris*. We prayed a novena for them and have held them in our thoughts and prayers ever since.