

Foundation

Mari Vieira

| Brazil |

translated by Stephanie Reist

...remaining perfect and pure in his memory like a castle ready made and furnished.

João Guimarães Rosa¹ “The Thin of Happiness” *The Third Bank of the River and Other Stories*. Trans. Barbara Shelby. Knopf: New York, 1968

Today's winds announced yesterday's arrival. The leaves of the mango tree intensely

glistened under the morning light. The chickens' bustling in the aviary announced the adventures to come. We woke and looked out the window, opened the door, bees buzzed their lazy swirls back toward the ground. The red earth, fresh from the night, lingered, eager for footprints. Boys and girls followed, by life's invitation, gathering the day as it began. Light overflowed, caressing and enveloping us, impelling us to go.

The river was a path, a crossing. If intense and swelling, the way forward would wait for another day. We watched. If the water gave up space to the stones, crossing would be possible. In the waters and in the stones the letters that birds frogs fish men women boys and girls read. No one argued. The lesson was simple and perennial. Harsh. Swelling. We went back. The windows that watched our return did not challenge us. They knew that today's light would overcome the rain that yesterday had spilt in the distance. The river is long and traverses places we know only through the news it brings us. Full. Empty. Dirty. Clean. Many branches. Intense leaves. Live fish. Vanished fish. Smells that we do not

possess. Unexpected color. The river brought us a world and took our world with it.

Our crossing would wait for another day. We nestled our things. The world exploded with life. The grinding of the mill announced the confection of *rapadura*² A Brazilian sweet made from dried unrefined cane sugar.. From the kitchen, she placed half of her body out the window and yelled “Aniceto, the kids didn’t go to school, it rained sheets over there.” “It rained, Ninha,” the two yelling for their voices to echo over the bubbling uproar of the mill. They didn’t doubt the girls. The truth rang out like that of an old healing aunt, curing without a pharmacy, undisputable. We raised our wings for other chores. In the yard, the chickens clucked for corn, eternally hungry. The dogs begged for attention, the house for the broom, the whirling top to be twirled, a ripe mango cried out to be eaten, the *rapadura* in the mill for us to try. The day ran by, well-versed in chores.

From the yard to the garden, from the garden to the barn, from the barn to the river, again. From the river to the stable. Sometimes we lingered there a bit more. The stable was divided into sections, stalls designated to specific owners. Under the covered area, only small calves or sick animals. It was a space for care. Those who went there knew of that mysterious gaze the cattle give that seemed to dominate us so. This time the calves were all strong and grown and had accompanied their mothers out to pasture. Under the covered area, there was just one young bull, there for no reason. His eyes gleamed and he seemed to almost converse, mooing quietly from time to time. He wanted affection. Boys and girls, under the burning sun, laughed out at the possibility of making art, their crimson-red feet already having met the earth's desire for footprints. The crossing. We whirlwinded back and forth. We returned to the river which, still vast, raged, taking the whole world with it. “Yup... it lowered just a bit.” “Where is it going to end up?” “Far, very far.” “As full as it is, it can go wherever it wants.”

And we continued rehearsing for life. The young bull stayed there. Mooing, wanting us, and us, bounding around the world, crazy with dreams. Someone points to a red ovenbird nest on a treetop above and suggests, “Should we see if there’s a baby bird in there?” “I’ll climb up, if you ride Rajado.” No one said anything. We remained, the four of us, living in the silence of the challenge. “If you go up there and fall and hurt yourself, dad will kill us.” “If

you're scared, don't even think of going up, because then you're doomed to fall." "No way." "I'll get on Stripey if you climb up to the red ovenbird. Then we'll choose which one of you will do what."

Nina went walking along the fence, choosing the best point from which to throw herself onto the young bull. Gera went for the ovenbird nest. Tiao and Nena stayed where they were, smiling with fear and courage. Nina began to win over the sly calf. Gera was already halfway to the nest. Nina put her forehead to the calf's head. The creature seemed like it wanted to be mounted. She got excited and stretched out her leg. The creature got spooked and Nina fell. Nene and Tião were spooked too. No one yelled. Children that make art and then on top of that hurt themselves get beat—everyone knew that. The two jumped into the stable, the calf went to the other side. They helped Nina up. "It was nothing, you're not even hurt. Come here. You can try again in a bit." Nina almost kept from crying. The two tears counted more as strength and breath than whimpering.

From way up high, Gera yelled out "come on up, it's easy." Nobody went. The three stood inside the fence, saying nothing. The calf made his way back, looking to make peace. The three brought their hands to his forehead. He lowered his head, sweetly. "Try again, Nina." Nina waited. She waited for him to drool in her hand, an affectionate drool. She stepped away from the others. The creature went after her, looking to apologize. "He likes you." "He does, he's my friend." She went circling atop the fence. She took a good distance from the others, and placed forehead to forehead once more. She caressed her. And he came, leaning his body against the fence. Nina rested her head on his neck. She embraced his hot fur. She breathed patiently. The others' hearts nearly burst with anticipation.

He did not move, he only bucked at the flies that were bothering him. He was a young boy calf and wanted to play too: Nina stretched her leg out slowly over his back. He did not move. She did not move. The two stopped, waiting. She wrapped her arms around his whole body, watching her companions with fear and happiness. They took their time. Sometimes, peace consumes silence. The other two inside the fence, without speaking, watched and admired Nina's ingenuity. At most, they waved their hands at her with a "go, go, go," frantic with anxiety at her conquest. Nina went. She sat on his back. He began to walk calmly. Nina prevailed over the calf in the time and manner that a hummingbird hovers over a flower.

Gera returned and celebrated in a deep silence with glimmering eyes. Fearful that a single word could undo the conquest.

"Now Nena you go up to the nest and Tião climb up on Rajado." Tião went on walking around the fence, stretching out his hand to Stripey's slobbery mouth. The three stood silence, awaiting Tião's heroic act. Neno stood still. Gera whispered: "Go, Nena, go up there, there are two baby birds." She went. She climbed up with ease. There at the top Nena stopped. She contemplated the immensity, Tião's grandiosity as he almost foolishly paraded atop the calf. She admired the open beaks of the baby birds. She adjusted herself on the tree, supported her back against a branch, felt secure and stretched her hand into the nest. She felt a light peck. She waited with her skinny black fingers close to their beaks. The little critters relaxed. She picked one up and immediately put it back down. She first contemplated the immense blue horizon and the reason for flight. Then she climbed a few more branches and saw the river. She climbed further, and saw Sinha Santa's house. A few more and she saw the grassy green sugar cane field, a house painted white with green windows and even farther a house painted pink. She climbed the rest of the branches and saw in the distance a town and the school in it and beyond that an infinite world. There were no more branches to climb. She could make out a green speck with traces of blue. Possibilities whose distance appetized her impishness.

They all reaped their victories. They closed the doors to their kingdoms and returned home. The food bubbled away on the stove. They found good-smelling plates and chores for after the meal. Plates to wash, cassava to peel, corn to shuck, firewood to gather. The four sat in a corner, their plates full with satisfaction. They began to whisper. "Gera tore his shorts. " "And you?" "Me? I got my dress a bit dirty when I fell." "Tiao didn't even fall." "Rajado is tame, Nina only fell because he got scared." "That's right." "There are two baby birds up in the nest." "Yeah there are. It's funny, I picked one of them up, just a little, you would like it, Nina." "Yeah you really would."

Dad and mom arrived to have lunch near them. Before they sat, they put the dog outside. The voice of the adults began to take up space. Quietly, Nina proposed, as they watched Dada and Mom come closer, "later we go back there for Nena and Gera to get on Rajado and for me to climb up to the nest." "Not me, I want to cross the river." "Are you crazy,

Nena? It's too high." "Not today, for later." For what? To go to school? "No, not just for that."

"To see the world."
