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Two Stories by Clarice Lispector Translated by Elizabeth Bishop

In my pantheon of favorite writers, Clarice Lispector is right there at the top. She's a writer, like Muriel Spark or Thomas Bernhard, who always make me ask when reading their work: Is this allowed? *Sometimes her prose has such power I am made to wonder if I have the strength and stability to keep reading. Championed by Elizabeth Bishop and Helene Cixous, Lispector is nevertheless still not well known to English-language readers. The miraculous internet sent these two Clarice Lispector stories my way recently via twitter and so I thought I'd post them.*

The Hen
Clarice Lispector
Translated by Elizabeth Bishop

(First published in the Summer 1964 issue of *The Kenyon Review*)

She was a Sunday hen. She was still alive only because it was not yet 9:00 o'clock.

She seemed calm. Since Saturday she had cowered in a corner of the kitchen. She didn't look at anyone, no one looked at her. Even when they had selected her, fingering her intimately and indifferently, they couldn't have said whether she was fat or thin. No one would ever have guessed that she had a desire.

So it was a surprise when she opened her little wings, puffed out her breast, and, after two or three tries, reached the wall of the terrace. For an instant she vacillated – long enough for the cook to scream – and then she was on the neighbor's terrace, and from there, by means of another awkward flight, she reached a tile roof. There she remained like a misplaced weather vane, hesitating, first on one foot, then on the other. The family was urgently called and, in consternation, saw their lunch standing beside a chimney. The father of the family, reminding himself of the double obligation of eating and of occasionally taking exercise, happily got into his bathing trunks and resolved to follow the itinerary of the hen. By cautious jumps he reached the roof, and the hen, trembling and hesitating, quickly picked another direction. The pursuit became more intense. From roof to roof, more than a block of the street was traversed. Unprepared for a more savage struggle for life, the hen had to decide for herself which routes to take, without any help from her race. In the young man, however, the sleeping hunter woke up. Lowly as was the prey, he gave a hunting cry.

Alone in the world, without father or mother, she ran, out of breath, concentrated, mute. Sometimes in her flight she would stand at bay on the edge of a roof, gasping; while the young man leaped over others with difficulty, she had a moment in which to collect herself. The she looked so free.

Stupid, timid, and free. Not victorious, the way a rooster in flight would have looked. What was there in her entrails that made a being of her? The hen is a being. It's true, she couldn't be counted on for anything. She herself couldn't count on herself – the way a rooster believes in his comb. Her only advantage was that there are so many hens that if one died another would appear at the same moment, exactly like her, as if it were the same hen.

Finally, at one of the moments when she stopped to enjoy her escape, the young man caught her. Amid feathers and cries, she was taken prisoner. Then she was carried in triumph, by one wing, across the roofs and deposited on the kitchen floor with a certain violence. Still dazed, she shook herself a little, cackling hoarsely and uncertainly.

It was then that it happened. Completely overwhelmed, the hen laid an egg. Surprised, exhausted. Perhaps it was premature. But immediately afterward, as if she had been born for maternity, she looked like an old, habitual mother. She sat down on the egg and remained that way, breathing, buttoning and unbuttoning her eyes. Her heart, so small on a plate, made the feathers rise and fall, and filled that which would never be more than an egg with warmth. Only the little girl was near-by and witnessed everything, terrified. As soon as she could tear herself away, she got up off the floor and shrieked: "Mama! Mama! Don't kill the hen any more! She laid an egg! She likes us!"

Everyone ran to the kitchen again and, silent, stood in a circle around the new mother. Warming her child, she was neither gentle nor harsh, neither happy nor sad; she was nothing; she was a hen. Which suggests no special sentiment. The father, the mother, and the daughter looked at her for some time, without any thought whatever to speak of. No one had ever patted the head of a hen. Finally, with a certain brusqueness, the father decided: "If you have this hen killed, I'll never eat chicken again in my life!"

"Me too!" the little girl vowed ardently.

The mother shrugged, tired.

Unconscious of the life that had been granted her, the hen began to live with the family. The little girl, coming home from school, threw down her school-bag and ran to the kitchen without stopping. Once in a while the father would still remember: "And to think I made her run in that state!" The hen became the queen of the house. Everyone knew it except the hen. She lived between the kitchen and the kitchen terrace, making use of her two capacities: apathy and fear.

But when everyone in the house was quiet and seemed to have forgotten her, she plucked up a little of the courage left over from her great escape and perambulated the tile floor, her body moving behind her head, deliberate as in a field, while the little head betrayed her: moving, rapid and vibrant, with the ancient and by now mechanical terror of her species.

Occasionally, and always more rarely, the hen resembled the one that had once stood plain against the air on the edge of the roof, ready to make an announcement. At such moments she filled her lungs with the impure air of the kitchen and, if females had been able to sing, she would not have sung, but she would have been much more contented. Though not even at these moments did the expression of her empty head change. In flight, at rest, giving birth, or pecking corn – it was the head of a hen, the same that was designed at the beginning of the centuries.

Until one day they killed her and ate her and the years went by.

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The Smallest Woman in the World

by Clarice Lispector
Translated by Elizabeth Bishop
(Originally published in the 1960 book of short stories, *Family Ties)*

In the depths of Equatorial Africa the French explorer, Marcel Pretre, hunter and man of the world, came across a tribe of surprisingly small pygmies. Therefore he was even more surprised when he was informed that a still smaller people existed, beyond forests and distances. So he plunged farther on.

In the Eastern Congo, near Lake Kivu, he really did discover the smallest pygmies in the world. And—like a box within a box within a box—obedient, perhaps, to the necessity nature sometimes feels of outdoing herself—among the smallest pygmies in the world there was the smallest of the smallest pygmies in the world.

Among mosquitoes and lukewarm trees, among leaves of the most rich and lazy green, Marcel Pretre found himself facing a woman seventeen and three-quarter inches high, full-grown, black, silent— "Black as a monkey," he informed the press—who lived in a treetop with her little spouse. In the tepid miasma of the jungle, that swells the fruits so early and gives them an almost intolerable sweetness, she was pregnant.

So there she stood, the smallest woman in the world. For an instant, in the buzzing heat, it seemed as if the Frenchman had unexpectedly reached his final destination. Probably only because he was not insane, his soul neither wavered nor broke its bounds. Feeling an immediate necessity for order and for giving names to what exists, he called her Little Flower. And in order to be able to classify her among the recognizable realities, he immediately began to collect facts about her.

Her race will soon be exterminated. Few examples are left of this species, which, if it were not for the sly dangers of Africa, might have multiplied. Besides disease, the deadly effluvium of the water, insufficient food, and ranging beasts, the great threat to the Likoualas are the savage Bahundes, a threat that surrounds them in the silent air, like the dawn of battle. The Bahundes hunt them with nets, like monkeys. And eat them. Like that: they catch them in nets and eat them. The tiny race, retreating, always retreating, has finished hiding away in the heart of Africa, where the lucky explorer discovered it. For strategic defense, they live in the highest trees. The women descend to grind and cook corn and to gather greens; the men, to hunt. When a child is born, it is left free almost immediately. It is true that, what with the beasts, the child frequently cannot enjoy this freedom for very long. But then it is true that it cannot be lamented that for such a short life there had been any long, hard work. And even the language that the child learns is short and simple, merely the essentials. The Likoualas use few names; they name things by gestures and animal noises. As for things of the spirit, they have a drum. While they dance to the sound of the drum, a little male stands guard against the Bahundes, who come from no one knows where.

That was the way, then, that the explorer discovered, standing at his very feet, the smallest existing human thing. His heart beat, because no emerald in the world is so rare. The teachings of the wise men of India are not so rare. The richest man in the world has never set eyes on such a strange grace. Right there was a woman that the greed of the most exquisite dream could never have imagined. It was then that the explorer said timidly, and with a delicacy of feeling of which his wife would never have thought him capable: "You are Little Flower."

At that moment, Little Flower scratched herself where no one scratches. The explorer—as if he were receiving the highest prize for chastity to which an idealistic man dares aspire—the explorer, experienced as he was, looked the other way.
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