

Sreten S. Petković

*Rembrandt,
the Miller's Son*

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REMBRANDT, THE MILLER'S SON

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CONTENTS

The Loss of Time	11
The Prophetess	14
Birds in the Desolate Sky	16
A Dandelion and Carob Cake	18
The Miller, Father with Seven Bread Crusts	22
Trade, Exchange of Fates	26
The Force of Silent Joy	31
The Evergreen Tongue	36
The Silver Line of the Sketch Dream	40
The Silence of the Bottom of the Sea	46
The Scent of Touch	50
The Sour Fishbone	55
Aunt Anna, the Aunt with a Big Hat	57
The Breadless Feast	64
A Pearl from the Bottom of the Sea	70
The Moon in the Mirror	73
The Deaf Wind	75
The Colour of Illusion	80
The Banquet in <i>The Royal Inn</i>	87
Form of Emptiness	93
The Black Foam of a Desolate Sea	95
The House of Salt	96

The Landscape of Thickness	98
The Chorus of Sailors	104
Self-Portrait Made with Sadness and Sorrow	107
The Great Sultana	111
The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp	115
The Word That Boggles the Mind	123
The Mouth Full of Flies	126
The Night Watch of Geertje from The Hague	133
A Thin Braided Thread	137
Legend of a Dream	145
The Stories from the Big Forest	148
A Joke to Drink, a Story to Eat and Everything to Take Away	157
Dutch Flyboat <i>The Moon's Shadow</i>	162
Pest in Jordan	167
A Visit by Medici	172
Titia	175
The Riemann Sphere	179
The Colour of Ember and the Colour of Ashes	187

“The whole Universe is alive...”

Nikola Tesla

*To my Djurdjija
and sons Stanko and Marko*

THE LOSS OF TIME

The thought is overwhelmed by silence. In the last moments of life, man is given unlimited time to see and hear all that is needed. To remember all that was important to him in life. At the moment of death he loses the dimension of time. He can think, see and remember everything at the same time. The thought continues to exist, though not in time any more. It seeks room in memory.

Once you lose the dimension of time you feel lightness. You detach yourself from the body and your look levitates, sort of. This is not a real look and landscape like in life. Rather, their bits and pieces saved in memory.

Sometimes, it is music, a voice calling you from a distance, persons and their shadows. Most often, it is colours that move and change forms like clouds in the sky and create in the warmth of understanding, of some pure thought.

The thought is expressed by the energy of exact meaning. At that time man gets to know everything. He is united with God. Thinks like God.

I am lying formless and sensationless, with breathing and vibration the only movements of the body. Perhaps I could also move the fingers of my right hand, but I have no strength left in me to do so. My heart beats like a drying river.

My breathing is hard and pent-up; I clasp at life, but I know that my life is burning out like the embers in the ashes. My

eyes are no longer recognising forms and do not understand them. I am falling down into an infinite pit.

The crystals shackle the clarity of the eye. The tear glitters in the distance before the leafing of the sight. As if I was on the roof of a house that I dare not leave.

The colours turn kaleidoscopically like on a windmill wheel. In a white gown, out of darkness comes Saskia with a loose red hair. She is smiling like when she calls me and my head is split with pain from the anguish of having lost her.

The sea was ravaged by a storm. Ships, like crazy horses, bucked high waves in the Amsterdam harbour. Lightning split the skies. Like now, all energy oozed out of me. I think I did not breathe or move the parts of my body. I did not close the eye, either. I had her image in front of me and in depth, in blood, a pain. I expected a wave to thump and wipe me off the face of the earth.

Saskia then comes up to a boy sleeping on sacks stacked in the darkness of the mill, lifts him in her arms and takes him out into the night. She takes him to the sea, puts him in a boat with big white sails and pushes the boat along the wind. The storm dies down and the white sail shimmers in the distance like a bird flying towards the moon.

Saskia is there no more. Soon, I shall not be there any more, either. I hope that we shall meet again, but it increasingly seems to me that I am expiring. I am simply passing through the twinkles of the mind and am being deposited at a bottom, motionless.

I am slowly losing consciousness? I only closed my eyes. From the darkness, I see light in the distance. A moth is flying around the lantern in the mill that Father used to hang above

Rembrandt, the Miller's Son

the entrance door. It darts headlong to the dancing flame even though it will scorch its wings.

Every light scorches, I ponder, and the Sun, fire and knowledge take a toll from those who dart to the flame experienceless and disrespectful of life demands.

I am opening my eyes and I see a black spider. It is crawling on my face. It has stretched its thin thread all the way from the ceiling to my nose. With the thread, it has linked me to the most distant point that I see from the place where I am lying motionless. It strikes me that it could bite me, but I see that it sees me as an object that does not threaten it in whatever way. I calmed myself and it continued to crawl. Its bite could do me no harm.

This is an exceptional opportunity, I ponder, to paint this spectacle, but the move of my right arm remains frozen in my thoughts.

THE PROPHETESS

There are days when man's life disentangles and when everything is changed. Before I set off on the journey, I had long been sitting in Father's room watching the little picture of my Mother that the Miller held by his bedside. An oil on canvas in a gold frame by an unknown author.

The morning was overcast and as dark as dusk. And the image from the picture reflected a strange shine. I understood the Miller as he said that he loved this picture that brought him peace and security. I saw that my Father had found the love in my Mother that he knew how to nourish, keep and pass on to his children.

Our Mother, Neeltgen van Zuybrouk, the middle of the three daughters of baker Willem van Zuybrouk, was a member of the Order of Saint Anna. Before she married our Father, she had spent two years in the monastery of the saintess. Also, her education prepared her for marriage and for raising children once she became a mother. Perhaps because of the preparation, she was always ready for everything that came her way. She knew answers to all our questions. Her comportment to each one of us was different and she expected different things from each child. She made sure that my brothers and I got up early and lent Father a hand in the mill. The sisters were expected to be at her beck and call and attend to the chores in the house and learn from the books she had

Rembrandt, the Miller's Son

brought from the monastery. She knew how to show love to everybody and set strict bounds of behaviour that were not to be transgressed. Probably under her influence, I was picked to go to the Latin University in Leiden.

The first picture to elicit my attention already at a very early age was the icon of the Prophetess Anna that Mother held above her small writing desk with a mirror at which she combed her hair, read and prayed when some of her nine children were taken ill or when our Father fell on hard times. I saw the image of my Mother in that picture and was amazed with the similarity that I dared not reveal even to her.

Sometimes, you must lose somebody in life in order to get somebody else. I lost the Miller and I never reconciled myself to the loss. However, I got Saskia: the greatest, in fact, the only love of my life.

The brightest thought that man can be carried away with and that can change him completely is love. Love is a thought in colour and its energy.

In life, I had other women who also captured my attention, but Saskia was my greatest joy.

From all the sufferings and hardships that may befall man in his life, a dark thought is the most difficult to cope with. And while sufferings and hardships pass with time or get used to, the dark thought racks his mind and soul. The longer it lasts, the longer it torments man and prevents other thoughts from giving him hope. Just as black trumps all other colours.

BIRDS IN THE DESOLATE SKY

Out of blackness through the cleavage, as if frozen by an empty thought, came the blueness of the sky, motionless. Scenes followed each other in quick succession in a sequence that I could not comprehend in a maelstrom of colours, light and darkness.

Silence prevailed. Since it rose, rays ablaze, the sun was stifling movement to all living things. A bird was flying in the distance or was my memory only playing games with me? The flapping of its wings could hardly be perceived, but it brought joy into the emptiness. The joy of movement.

I found a place, hidden from unbearable heat, under the crown of a big oak, but with a view of the sky and the bird in it. Now I could see two of them, chasing each other.

Was it the instinct of self-preservation that drove them to devour each other? Perhaps it was only one bird chasing its own shadow.

I wrinkled the brows and squinted to sharpen the vision and take a better look of what was happening in the desolate and torrid sky. And I saw the birds or shadows merge and flow into the zenith. There was no room for both of them in the empty and immense sky. One had to disappear into the other. As if they were people. As if the human mind had created them and they had disappeared from it. Black haze filled the empty skies once again in this morning of vivid recollection.

Rembrandt, the Miller's Son

Scarce is space for reason, just as it is scarce for light in pervasive darkness. Silence is the time needed for a thought to last. It is an apprehension, a premonition and hope, all in one.

Things that happen in life too fast seem to be half-said, insufficiently ripe. Only later do we realise how important it is that they happened exactly in that way and exactly at that time.

Like on that stormy night in the mill where I fled the bad weather outside and a tempest in my soul. When man ends up with innumerable questions to which he knows no answers he seeks salvation in loneliness.

A DANDELION AND CAROB CAKE

Young men think about women the same way non-swimmers think about the sea. They have to jump in and swim; when and how depends much more on others than on themselves. They are posed many questions, but they have no patience to solve them. The word from which they expect an answer is salty and the ear that hopes to get it is thirsty.

Night fell quickly after a short day. The wind was blowing from the sea pushing everything in front like a drunken sailor who cannot find his ship.

I was lying in the mill in my place on the stacked sacks listening to the shadows that the wind wrought as it played with the flame of the lantern.

The door of the mill creaked and opened a bit. Nobody stepped inside, so I thought the wind had opened it. I went over to close it, but all of a sudden a soft and cold hand caught my arm. Jolted in fright, I dragged a girl with me into the mill. She looked like a fairy to me. From under a scarf and a loose black hair shone two beautiful female eyes. Attracted by the sweetness of her look, I came up to her and put my hands on her frozen cheeks. The warmth of my palms must have pleased her, yet her fear made her flinch. She shut the door unawares as she stepped backwards and, frightened, leaned against it.

Rembrandt, the Miller's Son

“Do not be afraid, fairy of the tempest,” I muttered to her, rejoicing in her presence. “It’s warm in here.” I took her to the hearth where Mother had baked bread in the afternoon and where the embers still glimmered in the ashes.

She relaxed a bit and removed the scarf. Her long face, adorned with eyes which dominated it as stars dominate a clear night sky, peered from under a rolled, long black hair. The soft, red lips, perched above a small and pointed chin, just about hid an enigmatic smile. Her thin and elongate nose glimmered in the semi-darkness of the mill. When she took off her coat, I saw her body, slim and slender, quiver by the beat of her heart. Like a doe, caught in a trap, she bucked up, assessing the plight. The beauty of her eyes, the softness of her hands and the tenderness of her body mesmerised me.

My body ached with lust that spilled into a strong desire to embrace her passionately. Yet, I stayed put, wondering what to do. If I hit on, she will take fright and flutter away like a bird. What am I supposed to do now?! She seemed to have notice that I was holding back and that realisation allayed her fear. We looked each other into the eyes. I saw that she liked me and that she, too, was beginning to be carried away by passion. She was quivering and her knees tottered.

Through the play of the shadows wrought by the flames of the lantern, a smile broke out on her lips. I stepped to her. She did not recoil: she was there, waiting for me.

The storm stopped as if to make it possible to touch and lust to entwine. She closed her eyes slowly as if she was inviting me. Our hands glided towards each other and, joining in a passionate touch, went on to caress. Mine held her face, her shoulders and her loins. Hers caressed my hair and clasped in a grip of my neck.

We edged on slowly towards the pile of stacked sacks. She reclined first and I came upon her. Our limbs locked and our bodies, bundles of throb and excitement, demanded intensity. She pulled up her skirt and from between her dancing legs shot her female nakedness. I saw it first time in my life and experienced excitement that would forever be the source of lust and desire from which passion would gush difficult to quash. I felt as if I had tamed the Rhine and embraced the starry skies. At the bottom of the swelling river I found the quiver of the Universe.

We did not even notice that the storm had stopped. The light of the lantern spread evenly. I looked at her eyes wide open and calm like a man who had just regained consciousness. She was incongruously beautiful and unique.

“Who are you, my love?” I asked her ready to take the oath.

“Constance”, she said over the shoulder. “This was your first time. There, I got warm.” She repaired to the door, but came back. “Mother sent me to bring the dandelion and carob cake recipe to the Miller’s wife. Here, it’s written there. And who are you?”

“I am Rembrandt, student of the Latin University in Leiden and her son.”

“For complete love you must have everything: look, touch and time. The joy of that love is like the splendour of the Sun, and the grief for it is death,” said she and went through the door of the mill into the peaceful night.

On the piece of paper, it was written:

The dandelion and carob cake recipe.

Rembrandt, the Miller's Son

Grind leaves of fresh dandelion in a glass of wine, red wine from the bottom of the barrel. Hope chooses the glass and patience fills it.

Pound carob, picked from the highest boughs of the tree, in the mortar and mix it with sweetened flour. Pour wine over the mixture in which dandelion has changed colour into surreal violet and knead it with warm water heated in the morning sun. Knead long until the dough evens out as if ripened in ashes. Bake the cake on the fire burning grapevine and fanned by the rustling salty wind of the northern seas. Eat only at dawn with red wine. It makes possible, it is said, to dream the same dreams many time.

I got to know all answers at once. I licked as man's dream the salty words containing the knowledge of a young man about the most important question of his life. Hence my tongue turned white as if I had licked fire. I found out what love for a woman is and, mesmerised by it, I sought it all my life.

In the mill, Father learned to pick a sieve by looking at it. He could often sift a thought or a secret before he was said about them.

This morning he entered the mill as if he had dreamed my dreams. He covered me with a coat and whispered into my ear:

“Keep on sleeping, sweet hopes come out of sweet dreams. From now on, you will not dare forget what you have been confided.”