

# FRET TEN

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**fret/ten** (south German / Austrian): to labour, to toil, to scrape by with effort, to wear oneself out, to rub oneself raw

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The Constancy of Memory

I wake up in a child's body, inside the old farmers' shack. I clamber out of my parents' empty bed; it's chilly since they left it. Cold wood beneath my cystitis feet, warped boards bulging as if the dead were breaking open their graves. The black hallway swallows me so hard I get dizzy. I cling to the silhouettes of the wolves whining outside the kitchen door. Warm steam creeps through the gap under the door, rancid cloying meat smell pickles its way into my stomach. Tickles! Cows in the kitchen, at least what's left of them. Tripe tattering in a silver vat on the stove, soaking for dear life in the roiling water, like seafood in frothy stock, foam-shorn. My suckler stirs the dogs' feast with a long stick. The mother cow is part of the farm's fabric and yields to every yoke. It's good for you, she says, this stuff that looks like May morels. The ruminants' stomachs are being pre-chewed for them; she used to do the same with carrots for me. 'You know, my child,' my mother says, 'all we have here are either apron-wearers or apron-chasers, remember that.' Wiping her clean hands on the grubby cloth round her middle. No one here is white as snow. Not even me.

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## Landscape with Peacocks

When I was born I fell into a soft world where they let me feather my nest. I sank into a world of eiderdown, gently compressed beneath my bantam weight. All around swelled unbaked cakes of mother's dugs and paternal paunch, surrounding me on all sides, and if it wasn't them it was the yeasty dough of great-grandparents constantly rising somewhere, and when that was resting and proofing, there was always the mountain to tend to me, the plateau on which we lived, actually a lush hill, a frontal moraine, a wall of earth pushed up by a glacier that made me feel elevated above all things and suspended above the village. And even our alp puffed itself up before me as soon as I made a move to leave it. Everything ruffled up so I'd never bump or scrape. The adults bandaged the world around me and set the soft course. They padded my tiny shoes and I walked on cotton wool. Rough edges were ground down, just not my own. Everything gave way, resistance was rare. There was a constant feeling of floating above ground, observing all from a higher vantage point. We were the Sagrada Familia, and that consisted, along with the clan's usual devout suspects, of a hamlet grown rampant. Our modest abode bore a creamy yellow crumbling façade and pale-green window shutters. At its sides the outhouses bowed and scraped, the stable humped its back by a few fragile barns losing more scales with each year; we caught splinters of their wooden skin beneath our own whenever we touched them, as if they were proving they were still alive. We were intergrown with all these buildings and no one could say where they started and we stopped. My great-grandparents' garden was one big floral hiding-place, the grasses so high I could conceal myself like a fawn in a summer's field. Cats' nests between the bushes, hot from the sun and summer fur, freshly left and warm from lying, like dented cushions. I slept beneath redcurrants and brambles. I was so small that the gooseberries looked as big as watermelons. Behind the raspberry bushes were fields full of sunflowers, which began to snuffle at me the moment I stepped close to them mid-bloom. Their heads wandered with the light from east to west, eyes always on the mother disc. The peacocks on placid parade across the dusty ground, elegant as aerial acrobats balancing on a high-wire. On one day, the blue pheasants rose above fern fields, on the next they dragged their trains like baroque robes over the farmyard, behaving like better-bred

hens. The instant they spied an admirer, they made eyes with their iridescent peepers and spread their plumes, fanning themselves with every step as if applauding their own achievements. Further back in the garden, our flamingo colony simulated a magnificent sunset, on stilts in the swamp like coral-pink soldiers, the tips of their beaks looking chocolate-dipped. Everything was drenched in colour; only the pigeons were pale as grey mice and the crows looked like shadows of themselves, constantly lamenting their fate as they flew over forests.

The world smelled of treetops and stone pines. Of freshly fallen snow. Of mused earth and my childish scabs. An evening sun was always shining on all the nooks and crannies of this world, something was always buzzing through the air. Insects transmuted into snowflakes without anyone noticing at first, and thus the land had frosted over from one day to the next, at some point. We measured time by our surroundings and their variety. Once butterflies had turned into fireflies, it was summer solstice. The people were perfectly adapted to their surroundings; they resembled the vegetables they pulled from the earth and the fruit that fell to the ground. In winter, we closed the doors, barricaded ourselves in and read by candlelight. We didn't have money but we did have books and unwritten pages. I spent a lot of time with my great-grandparents, who lived in the same house as us, and if not with them then in the dovecote on the balcony of the ramshackle hut next door, with a view of the village. The wooden shack seemed about to collapse at any moment, the roof knee-deep upside-down, but I loved that rotting ivory tower where nobody could follow me in. Or nobody heavier than I was, and everybody weighed more than me. I hid letters beneath the loose boards, written to creatures from another species, to angels or aliens – all welcome. The view from up there contained the whole soft world, including the back garden that harboured as many secrets as mouseholes. To the south were the Watzmann and the Untersberg, and in the east you could make out the tip of the Schafberg snouting over our hills, breathing in the scent of our wheat fields. The mountains were at the exact distance where I wanted them. They never came too close, never blocked my view, but they made me feel I could set sail any time I liked. They staged a never-ending sea, behind it Italy, and waited for me at arm's reach like foremothers and forefathers.

Every day smelled of adventure, everywhere were refuges and boltholes to slip into, no wall was straight, no ground was even. Fantastic creatures urinated out of their mouths from the guttering. I stood underneath them to grow. I wasn't hungry; I was greedy for life. I thrived, and I grew so fast I was always breaking my bones. They splinted my arms, wrapped up my skin, brushed water over the white netting and waited until it all went hard, until that second skin became bone. I wore every plaster-cast like a trophy, bore it as a badge of honour.

I was uncomplicated and frost-hardy, always gestating new stories for myself. Never was it silent, apart from at first snow. Sewers and tunnels criss-crossed our land; beneath the peat meadow was a subterranean fire-fighting pond where I rowed an old boat and played ferryman. When an animal died, I threw on a cloak and oared the cadaver from one side to the other, thinking I could accompany its soul safely to the realm of the dead. The sky swung low, and what was above it I did not know; I only sensed it was far away. Next to the village rose a small hill, on which a semi-circular open chapel courted visitors. It did well; the blackbirds nested in the Virgin's crown, raising their chicks there year after year. I imagined the hill as an island, when I sat on it. I painted the mountains before me as an underwater landscape in India ink and titanium white, and on unclouded days I pictured living on a former seabed among all kinds of strange land inhabitants. As if the mountains all around had once been gigantic cliffs, their tips protruding above the water's surface. As if we were sitting with our behinds on the ocean floor, everything now thriving in the bright light and air. In bed every morning, I pressed my eyeballs against my brain with my fingers and then waited for the brightly coloured flashes to disappear, for the black shadow to clear and a wide space to open up, white with red veins running through it. And I imagined it was all a heavenly vault, a gateway to eternity. And then when I looked down from the window at the valley it was bustling with busy ants, trying hard to put life into their anthills. We're much closer to heaven than they are down there, I thought; we'd survive the great deluge. The valley with all its valley people would soon be flooded, would fill within seconds like a blocked sink. We, though, would take our animals on board the provisional ark, the granary on the field, a wooden grain store that looked like an evil witch's house with solid walls, a construction that seemed stolidly stable and would probably float.

My mother was constantly quoting the bible, chapter and verse beyond all rhyme and reason. My father told stories from old Greek mythology, demonstrating the Olympic family tree in practice in his names for the cows, chalked on little boards mounted on the wooden panels behind them. He himself looked like Poseidon when he thundered across the fields on the tractor, spraying the fields with slurry. On good days, he called my mother Demeter – he considered that brand of biodynamic agriculture the premiere class. He scavenged defective coffins from the local funeral parlour, sawed them up and stored potatoes in them, or made them into raised beds for radishes, the round and long kinds. I believed everything my father served me up with, took the pinch of salt for gold. My great-grandfather taught me rare words that we cherished like endangered species. And my mother recited strange poems as soon as darkness fell, but only once she'd put away the Holy Bible, not wanting her profane words to reach God's ear. 'Let me tell you a tale of hush-hush bowls,' she'd whisper as she circled her finger around my face, 'but don't tell a soul, else I'll peck off your nose.' She drew out the O in soul as long as my nozzle, which I'd inherited from her. She could recite all rhymes and poems by heart and her word-perfectness made me feel safe.

That deep sense of trust was in all our bones, no matter how brittle they might be. 'Eppan will be up there too,' my great-grandmother would say as soon as I expressed doubt in anything. 'Eppan will put it right. Eppan looks out for us.' Eppan was God knows what, but all her hope and faith was in that word.

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### The Invention of Monsters

I wasn't born, I was dropped, thrown and smashed to the ground, and I didn't scream – I swallowed. 'Why won't the child scream?!' the doctors cursed, slapping my bare buttocks to provoke a statement on the world. Screams are life-affirming, but I held my tongue. 'Wait a moment,' the midwife cautioned as she sounded out my rosy organism with her eyes and ears: 'She's swallowing!' And how I had to swallow! And what I had to swallow! A troupe of doctors in full regalia, up in arms about me and my getup, about the people who called themselves my parents from that point on, and about the rusty armour in which I was born. The senior doctor shook his skull, the junior doctor put her hands to her

head as they stared at the back seat of the grotty old banger on which my relieved childbirther adjusted the blood-soaked bath towel under her bottom. 'In this jalopy?!' the indignant medics cried. They shone headlights into our intimate world, dazzling the space splayed before them like a marquee. It was written on their faces: we were losers, failed the test, a basket of incapables discarded by life. Disgust, revulsion and arrogance chased across the faces of these exemplary medical men and women, and I began to feel shame before I'd even seen myself. Instead of pride, from then on I was puffed up with ambivalence about my ancestry. I was a clenched fist, an unpinned grenade. And my hands only ever unclenched when the doors closed behind those who left me. I had a lot to swallow. Over and over.

In the hard world, nothing billowed and bulged. Paternal paunches were war chests, filled to the brim with the previous generation's traumata; mother's cakes were dried-out lakes. Everything was enlarged. I was surrounded by tear sacs, skin lappets, stretched wombs, dugs drunk dry. Nothing anchored me, everything acquiesced. The clothes, the beds, even the animals' skins – I fell through it all. Nothing was in shape, everything felt floppy. The sick trees were in constant stress-induced bloom, the birds shed their plumage in fright moult, passing rats took up residence and chased the cats from their hay-nests or forced them to adopt their brood, which drank their fill from the cat's mother.

Time refused to pass, trickling to the ground like salt. The world had stopped still. It slipped back into the universe's eye socket to stare black holes into the vacuum. The universe's second eye, though, was the sun, an eye that blinded the others and seemed to shine through everything, though it was askew and blind itself. I knew precisely why I preferred the mild moon, even as a child. I saw my own face in it, with all of its craters.

Foresight was in the air. The ravens that flew over the roofs day by day only ever landed on our fields. Earthworms tied themselves in deliberate knots. The sun rose but rarely shone; the rain fell. The place had a constant stench of dog dirt, not obtrusive, often surprising, and it drove a person insane, never knowing where the smell came from. I'd examine shoe soles, sniff fingernails and scrape out the tallowy dirt from beneath them, just in case.

Life in the hard world was made up of plucking, quilling and skinning, of deboning and disintegrating. Everything aged and weathered and patina'd. What I loved most of all was the monstrosities. The misunderstood. Those who destroyed expectations in temper tantrums. But also those whom most people found disgusting. From whom people instinctively stepped back, kept their distance. Those whose flaws were uncountable, and those who made no bones about their weaknesses.

I had an indisputable passion for monsters, beasts and ogres. These monsters were my family, and I was a child starting school. Of course, that world was the most dangerous of all. As soon as I rested, time lapsed. I hated it when time chiselled new lines on my parents' faces. The two of them had to toil and travail incessantly, always in motion so as not to get swallowed up. Motionlessness meant standstill, and standstill meant accelerating decay. Alongside my great-grandparents, it was mainly the planets that raised me. And the distant city glow was my nightlight. Wolves were my cuddly toys, and I slept best to lamentations. They said the garden and I went together, but I didn't know exactly how. I felt like a parasite. Every growth spurt I had, the flowers began to wilt. If I was sick, the trees budded in winter. I didn't want to grow, laid heavy books on my head and laced myself up. I carried a retractable telescope at all times to remove myself from my surroundings, if need be. My parents had little time for me, argued a lot, fought with each other or each of the in-laws. And yet I idolised this hard world, in which I never had to check I was alive. My suffering proved it to me every day: if you're anguished, you're alive.

The world in which I lived – there were at least two. I could never decide which was closer to me; sometimes they blended seamlessly together but usually they conflicted. In one, there were animals everywhere, fur, pelt and feathers for stroking, sheltering, basking and bedding. It was a blessed realm, in which I could speak with the wolves and connive with the cats. I imitated the turkey and the peacocks so perfectly that their hens chased after me wherever I went, and the bull in the barn pouted when I showed him how. My switch to the other world was often abrupt, like a lightning strike, and the clashes between my parents poured petrol on the flames. The other world was brutal, full of grime and cadavers. Death was omnipresent, since someone in the huge

clan was always wasting away, diseased or dying, animals or humans, heads or tails. Here and there, I made myself little sub-worlds and side worlds. I illustrated the realms and labyrinths in my head and wrote anecdotes about them. I drew a magnificent sultan in a turban, eating from a sack of sultanas with wrinkly, pain-contorted faces and sitting on a giant banana suspended between two trees like a hammock. I made nature studies of insects, collected dead butterflies and moths, beetles and larvae, and kept notes on my insectarium. I made stag beetles and staghounds do battle on paper. Somewhere or other, I picked up that it was possible to change your genes, and I clung to that thought. A clever uncle, biologist, beekeeper and sculptor, whom the Steiner schoolkids called *Brains*, showed me his butterfly farm, a greenhouse full of brimstones flushed with fresh yellow, twisting and turning like it was alive. A yellow I tried to recreate in watercolour. The uncle inspected my collection of sketches, a bestiary of bizarre worlds and phantasms, deformed shapes and grotesque shadow forms that crept out from under the beds and inside the wardrobes while all were asleep and I lay awake, that squeezed through gaps in floorboards and squished through cracks in walls, that I put down on paper to designate them, to get them out of my insides so they might leave me in peace one day. As soon as my parents fell asleep, the creatures would steal into our bedroom, suddenly visible, swelling and thriving in the interplay of light and shadow. They fed on the night and showed their hideous faces in the cones of headlight cast by passing cars. They soaked up the damp in the old walls, drank their fill of darkness and ate into my parents' dreams, making them tired and confused the next morning as if they'd lost something and didn't know why they existed. The monsters and mongrels of the night were wilful and eerie. They were often animals with human traits or absurd human figures with animal faces. Sometimes they'd perch in the nut tree and steer it like a machine, making its branches reach in with its thin fingers, like feelers stretched out for me. I was at the mercy of these creatures, which sometimes metamorphosed into living animal cadavers, and when their time had come and darkness had broken they would burst all banks, flooding down to my toes and laming my brain. Once I'd finally fallen asleep out of exhaustion and tension, they switched seamlessly to my dreams, strolling around them. They'd laugh and pull faces, tugging at my body, of which I'd lost control, fully conscious. During the day, however, that deadly fear disappeared as if blown away,



and the horrors of the night morphed into delight in dread. Under my mother's protection, performing her chores alongside me, my joy effervesced as I performed my night-time fears. The uncle lent me books of illustrations by Alfred Kubin, and from then on I was certain the monsters I saw and created were not an invention, lived not only inside me. I wanted to build a world for others, let them see into parallel worlds, give names and descriptions to all these things, the craters and crevasses, the caves and niches and their residents large and small. One of those inhabitants was Kubin's *Creature from Mars*. A sad-looking fly-by-night character reduced to a skeleton, its scraggy bones enthroned on a hillock, its face gazing wistfully at the ground as it languishes in anguish. Its bald head balances like a ball atop a collar of skin, splintered bones or stringy fur, which might as well be a wide-open gullet, were it not for the skull. All around it, nothing but barren landscape, un hospitable and empty, ground on which nothing grows. It was the sight of this lonely creature that made me sad, illustrating my own isolation. All those around me had companions; all I had was my folks. And so I wrote about the creature, wrote it into life, called it Whimwham and Whimsidog because I heard a low whimper whenever I looked at it, a strange ringing, although it can't have been capable of complaining – for instead of a mouth, all it had was a trunk. I thought it needed friends, fireflies gathered around its eyes, which looked like spotlights. My visions and fantasies went beyond my abilities; after three or four pages I reached the end of my tether.

On a hot summer's day – I was not much older than eight, perhaps nine – I prowled around that uncle's fruit trees; he was wearing his beekeeper's kit that afternoon, walking like a Martian in a spacesuit, bouncing around a soft world. I felt safe and that made me distracted, as a buzzing approached from all sides. A swarm of bees darkened my view before I noticed countless drones caught in my hair, and I fell to the ground in a daze. The last thing I registered was the smell of overripe plums, squashed damsons on the asphalt, to which I, plum-thief, had come too close, which was why the bees were now poisoning my head with their toxic darts as a penalty. The uncle carried me into the house in his astronaut outfit; everything external to my insides had become extraterrestrial. I lay in bed like a soldier, my muscles tensed and my fists clenched, ready and willing to fight but losing all strength. A fever, the bee venom, struck me down and I fell down and stayed down for days. My mother would change the wet flannel on my

forehead, the lines on her face now furrows. Every family member stood at least once by my bed, the doctor several times, but what was said, I didn't know. And right then, during my blackout, was when the journeyman turned up. At a point when I saw no future and no time and no mercy or goals, at a moment when my childhood was slipping away from me and I sensed I had only weeks of it left before it was gone for good, that was when the journeyman moved in with us. He skulked around the villages, arrived on a harsh night and found refuge on our farm. The journeyman was a sinister figure who triggered great hostility in me, a creature for whom I felt nothing but abhorrence, a person who never spoke, only nodded; had I been awake and in possession of my senses, I would have chased him away then and there. Whenever the journeyman entered our house, he shed cold that permeated the room like a smell, as if spreading hoarfrost over everything in it. Including us.