

Karoline Georges, translation by Madeleine Stratford

The Victim

Most glance at her briefly, sideways, without slowing down before they hurry past, already elsewhere, at least in spirit. Some barely manage to avoid bumping into her before they blend into the crowd. Others, less careful, almost knock her over before they notice her, letting out a little gasp, mumbling a few excuses; the crowd violates her vital space, yet the little girl dances on points, seemingly unconcerned, her dress swirling up in the whipping wind.

One drop, two more: a storm is coming, and the more they watch out for the rain, the more she becomes a nuisance, an unforeseen bump in the road they must take. They sigh, growing impatient while she hops about, sometimes dodging their shoves, sometimes not. She avoids the angry glares of those who enjoin her to clear the way.

A man stops dead, his cell pressed onto his ear. His eyes skid down onto the child, lingering on the delicate plumpness of her backside. He cuts his conversation short and puts his cell away in his impeccable jacket. The girl twirls awkwardly with her eyes shut and her arms up in the air. She is six years old at most, maybe younger. Barefoot, her dress too short, her face smeared, her behind bare, she coils her locks around her wrists. The man takes three steps back, unsure, and retreats to his car, furtively glancing at the girl. He sits down behind the wheel, panting, mesmerized by the girl's movements, seduced by her pink flesh, this perfectly fresh life that clashes with the countless ashy carcasses buzzing around her, ridden with cellulite, varicose veins, and stretch marks. Even from a distance,

this girl insolently exudes her purity. The rain gets heavier, the crowd scatters, and the child suddenly stops, with a hand on her forehead, mouth open, looking in every direction, perhaps seeking shelter. Then, the impossible happens: a parking spot opens up right next to her. The man starts the car, gripping the wheel. Red light, green light, cars approaching. He gets annoyed, anxious – puts on the turn signal, honks, slowly pulls over. The girl sticks out her tongue, drinking straight from the sky, raindrops falling into her eyes, all over her body – she is right there, laughing, hopping about, her dress sticking to her blossom skin. The sky rumbles, the rain thickens, people run and slip, and the man dithers, his meeting still in the back of his mind, but the child haunts him, and no one is looking, no one will ever know. *No one*. The car window slides down, and the man leans out.

“You’re going to catch your death!”

The girl walks up to the stranger – broad smile, pink lips, bright eyes. The man cowers a little – impressed, intimidated.

“Sorry?”

The child’s fluty voice, her hand gliding over the car’s body, her innocent, cheerful stare.

“You can’t stay in the rain! Where’s your mother?”

“I can’t go home without my panties.”

The man quivers, pretends he cannot hear. The child comes closer, pressing her stomach against the door, swinging her leg.

“My panties. They’re stuck over the fence, back in that alley. Because of the dog. I was scared and didn’t see the wires.”

“But that’s no reason to stay in the rain! Get in, I’ll drive you home.”

“I have to get my panties back too. Will you help me, Mister?”

And here they are, side by side, in a narrow alley lined with trash cans. The man thinks about the plump little buns he will soon be stroking. Usually, he is content with sliding his hand between their thighs, just to feel the firmness of their tiny vulvas – the tactile memory is enough to feed his fantasies, but sometimes he presses their little fingers around his cock and asks them to squeeze as hard as they can. He enjoys seeing them delight in the effort; some even burst out laughing. It moves him every time – this naked, vibrant, candid joy. There is no pleasure greater than the one arising from the touch of these stars incarnate – nothing more beautiful, more fascinating, nothing more alive. He walks on, overly aroused, one hand in his pocket on his swollen sex, as the girl prances beside him, giggling, wet with rain. There comes the end of the alley, there comes a wall, and there they turn into another alley on their right – together. The man looks for the fence, grasping too late that there are no panties, no barbed wires.

The bat smashes his head. He collapses, his hand still clenched on his erect penis. He never sees the other girl, barely older, shielding her face with her arms, or the teenage girl with the vicious grin, or the object of his desire humming softly with her face against the wall, her eyes shut, and her hands over her ears, stamping in anticipation. The older girl keeps hitting the man as hard as she can, her wet hair hugging her budding breasts. The

other one carefully walks up to him, fumbles in his pockets, and pulls out a bunch of bills held together by a golden clip.

“This one’s rich,” she whispers. “Two more like him, and we can run away, far away from here.”