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The Salamander (Trans. David Rosenthal) **Mercè Rodoreda**

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THE SALAMANDER

MERCÈ RODOREDÀ

I walked under the willow tree, came to the patch of watercress, and knelt beside the pond. As usual, there were frogs all around. As soon as I got there they'd come out and bounce up to me. And when I began to comb my hair, the naughtiest ones would start touching my red skirt with the five little plaits on it, or pulling the scalloped border on my petticoats, all full of frills and tucks. And the water'd grow sadder and sadder, and the trees on the hillside slowly darken. But that day the frogs leapt into the water in one jump, and the water's mirror shattered into little pieces. And when the water was all smooth again I saw his face beside mine, like two shadows watching me from the other side. And so he wouldn't think I was frightened, I got up without a word, I began walking through the grass very calmly, and as soon as I heard him following. I looked around and stopped. Everything was quiet, and one edge of the sky was already sprinkled with stars. He'd halted a little ways off, and I didn't know what to do, but suddenly I got scared and started to run. And when I realized he was catching up with me, I stopped underneath the willow with my back against the trunk. He planted himself in front of me, with his arms stretched out on both sides so I couldn't escape. And then, looking into my eyes, he pressed me against the willow and with my hair all dishevelled, between him and the willow tree, I bit my lip so I wouldn't cry out from the pain in my chest and all my bones feeling like they were about to break. He put his mouth on my neck, and it burned where he put it.

The next day the trees on the hill were already black when he came, but the grass was still warm from the sun. He held me again against the willow trunk, and put his hand flat over my eyes. And all at once I felt like I was falling asleep, and the leaves were telling me things which made sense but which I didn't understand, say-

ing them softer and softer and slower and slower. And when I couldn't hear them anymore and my tongue was frozen with terror, I asked him, «And your wife?» And he told me, «You're my wife. Only you». My back was crushing the grass I'd hardly dared walk on when I was going to comb my hair. Just a little, to catch the smell of it breaking. Only you. Afterwards, when I opened my eyes, I saw the blond hair falling and she was bent over, looking at us blankly. And when she realized I'd seen her, she grabbed my hair and said «Witch». Very softly. But she let go of me immediately and grabbed him by his shirt collar. «Go on, go on», she said. And she led him away, pushing him as they went.

We never went back to the pond. We'd meet in stables, under haystacks, in the woods with the roots. But after that day when his wife led him away, the people in the village started looking at me like they didn't see me, and some of them would cross themselves quickly as I went by. After a while, when they saw me coming they'd go into their houses and lock the doors. I started hearing a word which followed me everywhere I went, as if the air whistled it or it came from the light and the darkness. Witch, witch, witch. The doors shut. I walked through the streets of a ghost town, and the eyes I saw between the slits in the curtains were always icy. One morning I had a lot of trouble opening my front door, which was old and cracked by the sun. They'd hung an ox's head in the middle of it, with two little green branches stuck in the eyes. I took it down. It was very heavy, and I left it on the ground since I didn't know what to do with it. The branches began to dry, and while they were drying the head began to stink and there was a swarm of milk-colored worms all around the neck on the side where they'd cut it.

Another day I found a headless pigeon, its breast red with blood, and another a sheep born dead before its time and two rat's ears. And when they stopped hanging dead animals on my door, they started to throw stones. They banged against the window and roof tiles at night, as big as fists... Then they had a procession. It was the beginning of winter. A windy day with scurry-

ing clouds, and the procession went very slowly, with white and purple paper flowers. I lay on the floor, watching it through the special door I'd made for the cat. And when it was almost in front of the door, with the wind, the saint, and the banners, the cat got frightened by the torches and chants and tried to come in. And when he saw me he let out a great shriek, with his back arched like a bridge. And the procession came to a halt, and the priest gave blessing after blessing, and the altar boys sang and the wind whipped the flames on the torches, and the sexton walked up and down, and everything was a flutter of white and purple petals from the paper flowers. Finally the procession went away. And before the holy water had dried on the walls, I went out looking for him and I couldn't find him anywhere. I searched in the stables, under haystacks in the woods with the roots — I knew it by heart. I always sat on the oldest root, which was all white and dusty like a bone. And that night, when I sat down, I suddenly realized I had no hope left. I lived facing backwards, with him inside me like a root in the earth. The next day they wrote «witch» on my door with a piece of charcoal. And that night, good and loud so I could hear them, two men said they should have burned me when I was little, along with my mother who used to fly around on eagle's wings when everyone was asleep. That they should have had me burned before they started needing me to pick garlic or tie the grain and alfalfa in sheaves or gather grapes from the poor vines.

One evening I thought I saw him at the entrance to the woods with the roots, but when I got closer he ran away and I couldn't tell if it was him or my desire for him or his shadow searching for me, lost like I was among the trees, pacing to and fro. «Witch», they said, and left me with my pain, which wasn't at all the kind they'd meant to give me. And I thought of the pond and the watercress and the willow's slender branches... The winter was dark and flat and leafless. Just ice and frost and the frozen moon. I couldn't move, because to walk around in winter is to walk in front of everybody and I didn't want them to see me. And when

spring came, with its joyous little leaves, they built a fire in the middle of the square, using dry wood, carefully cut.

Four men from the village came looking for me: the elders. From inside I told them I wouldn't go with them, and then the young ones came with their big red hands, and broke down the door with an axe. And I screamed, because they were dragging me from my own house, and I bit one and he hit the middle of my head with his fist, and they grabbed my arms and legs and threw me on top of the pile like one more branch, and they bound my arms and feet and left me with my skirt pulled up. I turned my head. The square was full of people, the young in front of the old, and the children off to one side with little olive branches and new Sunday smocks. And while I was looking at the children I caught sight of him. He was standing beside his wife, who was dressed in black with her blond hair, and he had his arm around her shoulder. I turned away and closed my eyes. When I opened them again, two old men came forward with burning torches, and the boys started singing the song of the burning witch. It was a very long song, and when they'd finished it the old men said they couldn't start the fire, that I wouldn't let them light it. And then the priest came up to the boys with his bowl full of holy water, and made them wet the olive branches and throw them on top of me, and soon I was covered with little olive branches, all with tiny shoots. And a little old lady, crooked and toothless, started laughing and went away and after a while she came back with two baskets full of dry heather and told the old men to spread them on the four sides of the bonfire, and she helped them, and then the fire caught. Four columns of smoke rose, and the flames twisted upwards and it seemed like a great sigh of relief went out of the hearts of all those people. The flames rose, chasing after the smoke, and I watched everything through a red downpour. And behind that water every man, woman, and child was like a happy shadow because I was burning.

The bottom of my skirt had turned black. I felt the fire in my kidneys, and from time to time, a flame chewed at my knee. It

seemed like the ropes that tied me were already burnt. And then something happened which made me grit my teeth. My arms and legs started getting shorter like the horns on a snail I once touched with my finger, and under my head where my neck and shoulders met, I felt something stretching and piercing me. And the fire howled and the resin bubbled... I saw some of the people looking at me raise their arms, and others were running and bumping into the ones who hadn't moved. And one whole side of the fire collapsed in a great shower of sparks, and when the scattered wood began burning again it seemed like someone was saying «She's a salamander». And I started walking over the burning coals, very slowly, because my tail was heavy.

I walked on all fours with my face against the ground. I was going towards the willow tree, rubbing against the wall, but when I got to the corner I turned my head slightly and off in the distance I saw my house, which looked like a flaming torch. There was no one in the street. I went past the stone bench, and then quickly through the house full of flames and glowing coals, towards the willow, towards the watercress, and when I was outside again I turned around because I wanted to see how the roof was burning. While I was staring at it the first drop fell, one of those hot, fat drops that give birth to toads, and then others fell, slowly at first and then faster, and soon all the water in the sky had poured down and the fire went out in a great cloud of smoke. I kept still. I couldn't see a thing, because night had fallen and the night was black and dense. I set out, wading through mud and puddles. My hands enjoyed sinking in the soft mush, but my feet grew weary behind me from getting stuck so often. I would have liked to run, but I couldn't. A clap of thunder stopped me in my tracks. Then came a bolt of lightning, and through the rocks I saw the willow. I was out of breath when I reached the pond. And when after the mud, which is dirt from the ground, I found the slime, which is dirt from the bottom of the water, I crept into a corner, half-buried between two roots. And then three little eels came along.

At dawn, I don't know if it was the next day or some other, I climbed out slowly and saw the high mountains beneath a sky smudged with clouds. I ran through the watercress and stopped at the trunk of the willow tree. The first leaves were still inside the buds, but the buds were turning green. I didn't know which way to turn. If I didn't watch where I was going, the blades of grass would prick my eyes — and I fell asleep among those blades until the sun was high in the sky. When I woke up I caught a tiny mosquito, and then looked for worms in the grass. Finally I went back to the slime and pretended to be asleep, because the three eels immediately came up, acting very playful.

The night I decided to go to the village there was lots of moonlight. The air was full of smells and the leaves were already fluttering on all the branches. I followed the path with the rocks, very carefully because the smallest things frightened me. When I got to my house, I rested. There was nothing but ruins and nettle bushes, with spiders spinning and spinning. I went around back and stopped in front of his garden. Beside the hollyhocks, the sunflowers hung their round flowers. I followed the bramble hedge without thinking why I was doing it, as if someone were telling me «Do this, do that», and slipped under his door. The ashes in the hearth were still warm. I lay down for a while, and after running around a bit all over I settled down under the bed. So tired that I fell asleep and didn't see the sunrise.

When I woke up there were shadows on the floor, because night was already falling again, and his wife was walking back and forth with a burning candle. I saw her feet and part of her legs, thin at the bottom, swollen higher up, with white stockings. Then I saw his feet, big, with blue socks falling over his ankles. And I saw their clothing fall, and heard them sitting on the bed. Their feet were dangling, his next to hers, and one of his feet went up and a sock fell, and she took off her stockings, pulling them off with both hands, and then I heard the sheets rustling as they pulled them up. They were talking very softly, and after a while, when I'd gotten used to the darkness, the moonlight came in

through the window, a window with four panes and two strips of wood that made a cross. And I crawled over to the light and placed myself right under the cross because inside myself, even though I wasn't dead, there was nothing inside me that was totally alive, and I prayed hard because I didn't know if I still was a person or only a little animal, or if I was half person and half animal. And also I prayed to know where I was, because at times I felt like I was underwater, and when I was underwater I felt like I was on the ground, and I never knew where I really was. When the moon went down they woke up, and I went back to my hiding place under the bed, and started to make myself a little nest with bits of fluff. And I spent many nights between the fluff and the cross. Sometimes I'd go outside and go up to the willow tree. When I was under the bed, I'd listen. It was just like before. «Only you», he'd say. And one night when the sheet was hanging on the floor I climbed up the sheet, holding onto the folds, and got into bed beside one of his legs. And he was as quiet as a corpse. He turned a little and his leg pressed down on top of me. I couldn't move. I breathed hard because he was crushing me, and I wiped my cheek against his leg, very carefully so as not to wake him.

But one day she did a housecleaning. I saw the white stockings and the raggedy broom, and just when I least expected it blond hair was dragging on the floor and she shoved the broom under the bed. I had to run because it seemed like the broom was searching for me, and suddenly I heard a scream and saw her feet running towards the door. She came back with a burning torch and jammed half her body under the bed and tried to burn my eyes. And I, clumsy, didn't know which way to run and was dazzled and bumped into everything: the legs on the bed, the walls, the feet on the chairs. I don't know how, I found myself outside and made for the puddle of water under the horses' drinking trough, and the water covered me up but two boys saw me and went to look for reeds and started poking me. I turned and faced them, with my whole head out of the water, and stared right at them. They threw down the reeds and ran away, but immediately

they came back with six or seven bigger boys, and they all threw stones and handfuls of dirt at me. A stone hit one of my little hands and broke it, but in the midst of badly aimed stones and in utter terror I was able to get away and run into the stable. And she came looking for me there with the broom, with the children constantly shouting, waiting at the door, and she poked me and tried to make me come out of my corner full of straw and I was dazzled again and bumped into the pails, the baskets, the sacks of carop beans, the horses' hoofs, and a horse reared because I'd bumped into one of his hoofs, and I went up with him. A whack from the broom touched my broken hand and almost pulled it off, and a trickle of black spit oozed from one side of my mouth. But I still was able to get away through a crack, and as I escaped I heard the broom poking and poking.

In the dead of night I went to the woods with the roots. I came out from under some bushes in the light of the rising moon. Everything seemed hopeless. The broken hand didn't hurt, but it was dangling by a sinew, and I had to lift my arm so it wouldn't drag too much. I walked a little crookedly, now over a root, now over a stone, till I got to the root where I used to sit sometimes before they dragged me off to the bonfire in the square, and I couldn't get to the other side because I kept slipping. And on and on and on, towards the willow tree, and towards the watercress and towards my slimy home under the water. The grass rustled in the wind, which whipped up bits of dry leaves and carried off short, bright strands from the flowers beside the path. I rubbed one side of my head against a tree trunk and slowly went towards the pond, and entered it holding my weary arm up, with the broken hand on it.

Under the water streaked with moonlight. I saw the three eels coming. They seemed a little blurred, and intertwined with each other, winding in and out, making slippery knots till the littlest one came up to me and bit my broken hand. A little juice came out of the wrist, looking like a wisp of smoke beneath the water. The eel held onto the hand and slowly pulled it, and while he was

pulling, he kept looking at me. And when he thought I wasn't watching he gave one or two hard, stubborn jerks. And the others played at entwining as if they were making a rope, and the one who was biting my hand gave a furious yank and the sinew must have snapped because he carried off the hand and when he had it he looked at me as if to say: «Now I've got it!» I closed my eyes for a while, and when I opened them the eel was still there, between the shadow and the shimmering bits of light, with the little hand in his mouth — a sheaf of bones stuck together, covered by a bit of black skin. And I don't know why, but all of a sudden I saw the path with the stones, the spiders inside my house, the legs hanging over the side of the bed. They were dangling, white and blue, like they were sitting on top of the water, but empty, like spread-out washing, and the rocking water made them sway from side to side. And I saw myself under that cross made of shadows, above that fire full of colors that rose shrieking and didn't burn me... And while I was seeing all these things the eels were playing with that piece of me, letting it go and then grabbing it again, and the hand went from one eel to the next, whirling around like a little leaf, with all the fingers separated. And I was in both worlds: in the slime with the eels, and a little in that world of I don't know where... till the eels got tired and the slime sucked my hand under... a dead shadow, slowly smoothing the dirt in the water, for days and days and days, in that slimy corner, among thirsty grass roots and willow roots that had drunk there since the beginning of time.

(From *My Christina & Other Stories*, translated by David Rosenthal, Port Townsend: Graywolf Press, 1984, pp. 3-13)