

Lena Eltang. The Other Drums

Translated by Marian Schwartz

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*But if you force him to look straight at the light, won't his eyes hurt,
and won't he come running back to what he can see?*

Just because you're in prison doesn't mean you committed a crime.

That's how the world's been made since Plutarch's day, or maybe since the beginning of time, since the first day of the clay people a pensive Nüwa scattered over the earth after she used the legs of the tortoise as struts to hold up the firmament. Just take Phidias, who was originally accused of stealing gold, which he used to make a cape for a goddess, but later, when they scraped the statue and verified the gold laminae and his fellow tribesmen calmed down, others came and said the sculptor had offended the gods by putting the profiles of two mortals on the shield, his own and Pericles'.

If it's not money, it's politics. Poor Phidias was condemned to prison, where he ended up, and being there was so awful he died fairly soon after.

If on the day I saw Lisbon for the first time someone had told me I was going to go to prison, be it over money, or politics, or the stumps of the heavenly tortoise's legs, I would have said they were nuts. I was fourteen, I'd recently read *The Count of Monte Cristo*, and I was excitedly recounting the story to my cousin. Agné and I were standing on the terrace shooting her new bow with underwear elastic instead of a bowstring, trying to hit the fountain, or even better, the salmon's haughty head, right in its juicy, olive eye! I told my cousin about Liutas and my affairs in Vilnius: about the dry ice bombs we got from the ice cream man, and about the sodium nitrate rockets and ping-pong balls. Later, to convince her even more, I pulled my elastic out in the storeroom and made the bow. My cousin was laughing and hopping about, and I was amazed: the first day she'd seemed so grownup, with those pink-lipsticked lips and drawling, preachy way of pronouncing her words, I even thought she was sixteen, at least.

I'd never once seen my cousin before I came to Lisbon. Nor had I seen her mother, who wrote her name such a funny way: Zoë. My tall, skinny aunt didn't look like my mother, but my mother said that was as it should be. They weren't related, my aunt didn't have a drop of Lithuanian blood, she wasn't a Catholic, and she hadn't lived in Vilnius very long, so it was odd she'd invited us at all.

She's Russian from head to foot, my mother said when we were standing on the terrace, and I couldn't help but turn around and look at my aunt's head and feet through the glass door. Her head was small and smooth. Zoya braided her hair and pinned her braids in a knot, and the knot lay low on her swarthy neck and fluffed out like a coconut. As for her feet, I'd seen her bare feet resting in her husband Fabião's hands; but her legs were covered by her green cotton smock.

At that time I was trying not to wear glasses, so I couldn't examine my aunt properly, and I felt weird looking at her anyway. Zoya was sitting in a rattan rocking chair, and Fabião was massaging her feet, seated beside her on the floor, he was always doing that, totally unembarrassed by us. When he was doing this he looked as though one more minute and he was going to lift her foot to his face and kiss it. Basically, he looked like an idiot, though he was a considerable age and looked sinewy and angular, like an oak root.

Agné came out on the terrace holding a bottle of lemonade and slowly started drinking, her back to the doors, and I realized she felt weird looking at them, too, and for the first time I thought that living alone with my mother wasn't so bad. Agné didn't know a single word of Lithuanian other than *mamyte* and *ledai*, even though she had an ancient Lithuanian name and hair the color of lightly dried hay, even lighter than my school friend Liutas. It's amazing, but fair-haired people have been swarming around me since I was a child, like the vitreous *Palpita vitrealis* moth or the pale *Sitochroa Palealis*. Meanwhile, my wife is jet-black, my mother has a hank of copper wire on her head, and there's no telling what I am—in winter my hair darkens up instantly, and in summer it bleaches to a creamy mane.

I remember Liutas seeing me off when I went to Lisbon. We sat on the windowsill in our entryway all day drinking a bitter liqueur, forty proof. That day he brought me his leather jacket—the real deal, a driving jacket with zippered pockets—so I wouldn't disgrace myself abroad in my old coat and, on top of that, a handful of Estonian money exchanged at school for marks. The Estonians had just minted their white, one-crown coins, which were an exact match for German change in weight and size, so you could use them in vending machines. In Frankfurt, Mama and I had to transfer to a Portuguese airlines flight, so I quietly ransacked all the vending machines in the waiting room, stuffing my pockets with packs of Marlboros and bags of salted almonds. When we showed up at our relatives', first thing I showered my loot on the kitchen table to the amazed looks of my aunt and Fabião. That's all right, I didn't have any other present anyway. Had Fabião known that less than six years later I would spend the night with his wife in a room at the Barclay Hotel, he would probably have been even more amazed. He died long before that happened, thereby depriving himself of the

opportunity to drag me out on the square and jam a radish or a big spiny fish up my ass and then sprinkle the sinful parts of my body with hot ashes—as adulterers were supposed to have happen to them in the olden days.

He died in '94. That year there was gunfire on the market square in Sarajevo, Indians revolted in Mexico, the *Estonia* sank, the Shoemaker-Levy comet collided with Jupiter, and I entered university and moved into the peeling dormitory on Pepleri Street. That year I didn't give a thought to the Lisbon terrace, I clean forgot it, and my aunt, and my cousin, who I kissed one rainy day under the rug between the piano's lion paws. I was reading *Introduction to Egyptology* and visiting two classmates who had rented a little house with a stove on the outskirts of town because it was cold in the dorm and there were drafts coming in all the windows. On my way to see the girls, I would rip boards off strangers' fences or steal charcoal, and once I was chased by an Estonian homeowner, who shouted, "*Kurat! Kurat!*" so I threw the briquettes away and took off—just to give him satisfaction.

When they led me out of the building, the inspector turned the knife switch on the landing, locked the door with my key, and dropped the whole bunch into my coat pocket. My hands were cuffed behind my back—they had immediately put handcuffs on me—and one of the policemen even held me by the shoulder from behind, as if I had somewhere to run. Baixa had managed to tie a warm scarf around my neck, and I was afraid it would come undone and fall off. They put me in the van with all the formalities, pressing my head down for some reason, though the van's door was quite tall, a man's height.

This gesture reminded me of the movement of a groom at the racetrack I'd glimpsed when I was there last winter—with my friend Lilienthal, who had barely started going out in public after a few months on opiates. The minute he started feeling a little better he dragged me off to the racetrack, though you had to transfer twice to get to Estoril from his house. We searched for this jockey who was supposed to suggest a few sure bets and for a long time wandered around the back parts of the stables, which smelled of wet sawdust. Finally we came out on the riding ring and saw a shaggy, high-strung pony being driven in a circle along a barbed-wire fence.

The pony would shake its head indignantly, toss its croup, and try to smash its rider against the fence, for which the tips of its ears were immediately given a lashing. When the jockey heard his name he hurried over and led the horse to the entrance to say hello to Lee. I noticed that he forcefully pressed the pony's head down with his gloved hand and stood like that without removing his hand the whole time he was talking to us. Catching my hostile

look, he said he did this not to be mean but so the horse would know the lesson wasn't over, his stall was far away, and his master demanded obedience.

There were no windows in the police van, so I looked at the back of the inspector's head looming up ahead through the narrow, dirty little window. The back of his head was flat, flattened even, which speaks to greed and obstinacy, and his neck was crooked, which attests to a lively mind. All that remained to find out was whether he would behave brutally in the interrogation, I thought, but then the van slowed down, the gates banged, and the inspector turned around and nodded to me in farewell.

"You're going on, Kairys. Without me."

The sergeant signaled to me to step out of the van and led me forward, pressing my head down with his gloved hand so that I could only see the gravel-strewn ground, then a path paved in gray slabs and the front steps. At the door itself I looked up and read *Police Department No. 6*. And a little farther down: *Calçada dos Barbadinhos*. It was odd we'd driven for so long. I'd had occasion to visit an antique dealer I knew in this neighborhood, and I'd come here on foot, with a couple of candlesticks under my arm, or a cut-glass decanter wrapped in flannel. On the front steps the sergeant grimaced, as if he'd thought of something nasty, took a paper bag out of his pocket, smoothed it out, and deftly slipped it over my head.

"Sorry, brother. Those are the rules here."

I stood calmly by the door listening to his retreating steps. The van door slammed shut, someone started laughing, and then the engine turned over and the gravel rustled. Why had they taken me to the northwest? Wasn't there a homicide department in the Alfama precinct? Probably because I'm a foreigner and there was some special department here for immigrant criminals. The door opened and they took me by the handcuffs and pulled me in. Dirty rotten conspirators, you've been reading too much about Guantanamo, I said, earning myself an immediate jab to the rib. Evidently the road from here led only to the airport and home, to Lithuania, to the Lukiškių Street prison, I thought, as I walked down the endless corridor. The convoy was holding onto my shoulder and cautioning me quietly: stairs, stop, right.

I was expecting harsh questioning, but they led me to the second floor, took the bag off my head, shoved me into a cell with a concrete bench coming right out of the wall, took off my handcuffs, and left me. They didn't even do a search, and they might have made a tidy profit off me. It was cold sitting on the concrete so I started walking along the wall, counting my steps for some reason, and after three thousand six hundred steps they brought me a

blanket and mattress stuffed with something like buckwheat husks. I stretched out on the bench facing the wall, saw the word "banana" in front of me, and closed my eyes.

Imagine, a concrete bench. The year before last, when I was in Florence, I'd had to sleep on a perch half the width of a sleeping berth. As it happened, I was living in a cheap apartment near the Arno River, where the bathtub was in the middle of the kitchen, there wasn't any bedroom, and a rickety library-type ladder led to the attic. For a long time I couldn't get used to it and waking I would sit up abruptly in bed and hit my head on an oak cross-beam. A week later a dent seemed to have formed in the two-hundred-year-old beam, barely noticeable but of perfectly obvious origin. For some reason this cheered me up. I thought about those who would move in here after me. They would look at the oak beam and chuckle, thinking about the previous lodger.

They'll fall asleep thinking of me—this is what excited me at the time, hard though it is to believe in this era of World of Warcraft.

*In a town walled off by impassable dark
A question in parliament: who's going home?
No one answers, home's too far,
And they're all dead anyhow, so who's to go?*

Perfection makes me anxious.

At my Vilnius school I nearly got myself blacklisted because one night I snuck into the mineralogy lab and ran off with two feldspar druses and a superb smoky hexahedral quartz, which poked a hole in the pocket of my school jacket. I'd wanted to do this for a long time. I'd been looking at them for days while our geographer talked to us about pegmatite veins, I'd been looking at them obsessively, and they'd been looking at me.

A couple of days later my mother found my loot, set it out on the kitchen table, and questioned me severely. It was hard to hide anything in our house. We didn't even have bookshelves, to say nothing of an attic or a cellar with a hiding place. I admitted everything and agreed to take the stones back, it was all so unimportant, I didn't even like them that much anymore. Having spent a while under my bed, the crystals were dusty and now lay boringly on the checkered tablecloth. I wrapped them up in newspaper, stuck them in my briefcase, and took them to school, where the geographer and head teacher, who had had a

hasty bite to eat and were ready for retribution, awaited me in the teacher's lounge, which smelled like sandwiches.

If things deceive us, it is by being more real than they seem, Chesterton wrote. *As ends in themselves they always deceive us; but as things tending to a greater end, they are even more real than we think them. If they seem to have a relative unreality (so to speak) it is because they are potential and not actual; they are unfulfilled, like packets of seeds or boxes of fireworks.* Do you believe in the coffeepot where the heart should be in Antonin Artaud's self-portrait? I do. I myself have a screen and keyboard where my heart should be, and they are the flickering of my arrhythmias and the quivering of my softly sinking valves (I'm not sure valves sink, but what the hell).

Take away my chance to sink my fingers into the keys and run my eyes over the letters and I'd wither, fall silent, plunge into the boiling pot of reality like the crabs in the cloudy water near Grand Central Station in New York. They used to catch them straight off the veranda of the seafood café, rip off their claws, and toss them back in the water. Just like me—all I have to do is see my nimble Cyrillic, the black beetles running over the shining white field, and I grow claws, I revive, I slip into the water and move off sideways, sideways, to my own invented bottom.

Only the Cyrillic and I exist, the Lithuanian letters aren't agile enough and are full of little hairs that snag on your tongue like a goose feather on parchment, while Russian lies at my chest, in that special dent in my diaphragm men press a child not theirs to while its mother has gone into the front hall to pull on a stocking—press it firmly, hold it awkwardly, but with understanding. All right, it can be me, Cyrillic, and also Pastor Donelaitis. And Lake Mergelių Akys! The guilt that fills me now to the very brim, like a well after a downpour, should not exist at all, inasmuch as evil and good are arbitrary. In prison I realized this on the fourth day because on the fourth day they called me in to see the investigator, Proença.

"You are admitting your guilt," he said, and I saw that sentence in the air between us, like the swish of a paper streamer. I did not see a question mark; the investigator was bored. Either he had no questions for me or he knew all the answers in advance. As for me, I'd waited so long for the summons to this office that I was ready to talk about anything: the Reconquista, gas prices, the singer Amália Rodrigues. After that first question Proença fell silent, poured himself some tea, and started filling in some blanks in my dossier. After about ten minutes another guy came into the office who I took to be the clerk because he was dressed in plainclothes, but he sat down sideways to the investigator's desk and started

swinging his foot. Then the two guards who had been stationed by the door came in and I thought there were an awful lot of people in the office for a simple interrogation.

"You're coming with us to identify the body, Kairys. Do you have a strong stomach?" Proença sipped his tea and smiled. He had a subtle, slippery smile that I wanted to catch and hold briefly in my fingers.

"I've already seen her body. Don't get your hopes up that I'll confess to something I didn't do in the morgue."

"Her body? Yeah, he's playing dumb," the other one said. "It says here when you were arrested you said the gun belonged to you. Not only that, you admitted in front of witnesses that you knew about the murder committed that night. I'd like to know how."

"From a computer entry, how else? I saw her being killed with my gun, but I didn't get a good look at who was doing the shooting. I also saw them hide her body in a garbage bag."

"You have lousy Portuguese for someone who's been living here nearly seven years. Don't you mean *his* body?" Proença was so menacingly placid, it put me on my guard.

"I think the dead man himself had no idea who he was. But you're right. No matter what he thought about himself, he was all guy. I saw a real penis, his *caralho*, and it wasn't glued on."

"Oh, you did did you?" He stopped by my chair. "Your admission will have to be entered into the record. The victim was fully clothed when we found his body. His underwear was intact, too. We know you knew the dead man well but had no idea you were linked by relations of that nature."

"Put in what you like. There were no relations. Although I'm sure the man who killed him had deviations on sexual grounds."

"I've never seen a monster like this before," the other one interrupted. "He kills his friend and then calls the deceased a pervert! There's a shit for you."

The other one was wearing a fresh shirt, I caught its citrus scent when he knocked me and my chair to the floor. Proença squatted beside me and shook his head sympathetically. His face wasn't old but was covered in fine pocks that looked like powder marks just like the ones I saw on his boot tips; he must not have used polish and done a lot of walking. The footwear of his assistants standing close to me in a little circle was newer and simpler. I examined their boots for quite a while, lying on the floor and thinking about Orson Welles.

When they were shooting *Citizen Kane*, the director had them smash a hole in the studio's cement floor and made the cameraman climb down there so that in the decisive scene

people would look like real giants. I wondered whether Orson Welles had ever had to lie on the floor of an interrogator's office. Probably. Otherwise, how could he have guessed that? I also thought about the spider hanging on the web it had started to spin from the tabletop where the file with my *case* lay, where it was written about a murder I didn't commit.

When Terreiro do Pago came for me, I was sure they'd found the Danish girl's body and now I was going to have to start all over explaining everything. Sitting in the kitchen across from the inspector, I waited for one of the policemen to go up to the second floor and shout down, "Send up a fingerprint man! I found where he killed the girl; there are even spots on the walls from the soapy water and vinegar." But no one did. They led me out of the house fairly quickly and sent me to the precinct, sealing the front door. I had the key in my pocket, so that, after thinking carefully I realized that no one cared about the *locus delicti*. I had no idea where Dodo had gone, where all the rest of the gang was hiding out, or what I should say so that they would believe me here.

If they believed me I'd go to prison for involvement in a robbery and concealing evidence; if they didn't, I'd go for murder. St. Martin's Day eventually comes for every pig, as one Spaniard said who had also been in captivity. The Spaniard's mother, the good Doña Leonor, ransomed him for two thousand ducats, but there was definitely no point in counting on my mother, the stern pani Judita.

When I fell off the chair, I hit my head on the edge of the table and my nose gushed blood, but they didn't offer me a handkerchief or a tissue. The chair fell, too, and crushed my right hand, and I wanted to push it off but the one who'd shoved me smiled and put his foot on the cross-piece, not letting me get up. For a while I went deaf, but my hearing quickly returned—with a painful pop, like sometimes after a plane lands too fast.

Up the hill Fedora went, his bast shoe by a cord. His lace went snap—and that was the end of the blood. That's how they cast a spell on blood in the places where my nurse was born. Odd I still remember it. I cautiously reached my other hand into my coat's inside pocket. Apparently my glasses were intact, which was good. I'd bought the frames back during the good times, when I was working in Bairro Alto: gold and steel, German quality. This is why I love the Portuguese: they don't try that hard even when they're beating you. To say nothing of the local bullfights. They don't kill the bull in the arena, his horns are filed down, and the crazy *forcados* hop around in caps—it's a traveling circus, not a bullfight.

The victim was clothed when we found his body. Bullshit. The Danish girl was wearing a white dress with nothing underneath, that much I saw as clearly as I see my own

blood-smeared palm right now. What underwear? What jeans? But if I told them that they'd take to kicking me and hitting me with chairs and whatever else came to hand.

Two days before the arrest I'd seen the murdered Henrietta in the city and was not even that surprised. For a while I'd pursued her like a bored Rasta after some sweet smoke, then she'd floated through the tall doors of the Rossio train station and dropped out of sight. She was wearing a black dress, but I thought ghosts chose black—not the shiny black the Latini called *niger* but the matte one, that is, *ater*. Ghosts can't allow themselves to look foolish, which is right. On the other hand, something else isn't right: I'm sitting in prison for murdering a Danish girl, and it would never occur to her to write the inspector an exculpatory letter in lichen juice ink. Or appear to him in his dream with her own skull under her arm and tell him who in fact shot her that windy February night.

It's perfectly clear that after showing me the Danish ghost's back, Providence let me know of impending events. Providence is the Christian word for incident, Chamfort said, but I say, Providence is the pagan word for intuition. When I told myself this, the spider sitting in ambush caught a fly and started deftly winding it round, entangling it in sticky thread. The fly was big and amber-colored, but the hunter was nobody's fool, I realized that straight off. Here's your answer, Kostas, I thought, shutting my eyes and listening to the policemen discussing the storm that night and the FC Porto team. I knew there was no one to complain to, moreover I couldn't even get properly angry. This was my first interrogation, I hadn't seen people for a long time, and I missed them terribly.

And nothing anyone says is going to incline you against those you trust, my favorite philosopher used to say, but he didn't say what to do if you didn't trust anyone. All those days I'd been waiting for the interrogation, lounging about my cell, sorting through names and events in an attempt to assemble the parts of a brainteaser, an ivory tangram, but now they'd called me in for questioning and everything was getting even more confused, and all I had in my hands was a bundle of dogwood bast.

No matter what, I decided to write about everything that came to mind, including you, Hannah, though my memory of you is rather vague. Here's what I remember: long legs with reddened knees, a drawl that stumbled over consonants, a bun of black braids at your nape (here they call that kind of bun a *bolo rei* and they put citron in it) and your boyish habit of slapping whoever you were talking to on the shoulder. I remember kissing you in the dorm's empty hallway because your hick roommate never went out at night. Maybe it's for the best, I thought as I settled in to sleep in the pine-shelf-lined room I shared with the Sinologist.

We even had shelves half my height between our beds, so we slept in a sheep pen constructed of blue volumes of *Journey to the West* and green bricks of Plutarch.

I'm not remembering too much, right? All right then. Someone who writes doesn't have to remember how everything *really was*, after all, he has a palette knife he can use to mix not just ochre and whiting as well as a palette for scraping, cleaning off excess.

And if you sharpen your palette knife properly, you can likely also kill.