

Translated excerpt

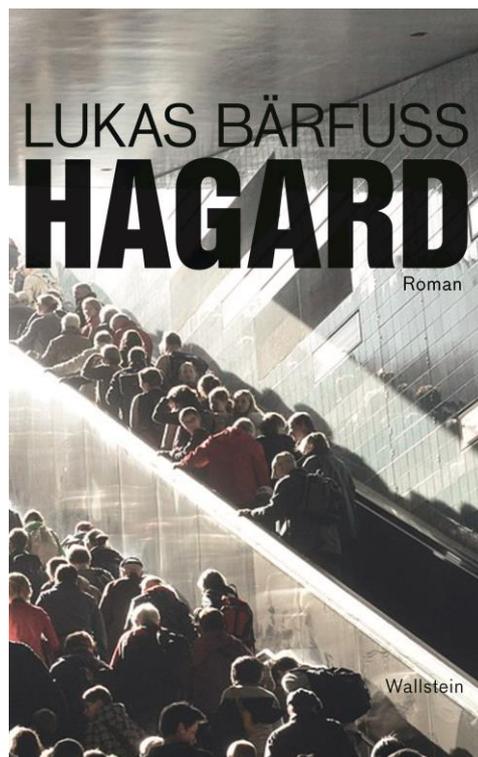
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***Hagard***

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*For Muriel*

*And it is all one to me where I am to begin; for I shall return there again.*

Parmenides Fragment V

For far too long I've been trying to understand Philips' story. I want to unveil the secret hidden within it. Time and again I've failed to solve the riddle of those images that haunt me, images of cruelty and comedy that occur in every narrative where desire encounters death.

I know everything and I don't understand anything. I know the sequence of events. I know how the story begins, I know the date and I know the place: It's the pretzel stand in front of the department store at Bellevue. I know when it comes to an end, namely thirty-six hours later, early Thursday morning, the thirteenth of March, on a balcony somewhere in the suburbs. The events that happened in the meantime also have been resolved: the matter with the fur, the first cold night in the car, the missing purse, the magpie, the lost shoe, the dead Japanese mathematician - all of that is out in the open. But the circumstances, the conditions which made these events possible, remain in the dark. And the more thoroughly I go about clarifying the details, the more obscure the world becomes in which the story took place. One might be tempted to think I'm stuck in the same boat as that person described by the proverb; but the forest, I insist, is merely an assertion, an abstract system that cannot be found in reality. The forest breaks down into trees, just as the sky breaks down into planets, stars and meteors.

After all my futile attempts to find a connection in the images, I have come to the conclusion that it is not this story, as such, that I don't understand, rather it is the question how to explain my entanglement, to find out what they are trying to tell me, those apparitions that have beguiled and enchanted me, that more than once have led me to the brink of madness.

My existence depends on this story, at least that's what I keep telling myself, and at the same time I know how ridiculous I am, and that I have nothing to fear, I could easily let go of the events of those days in March and nothing would happen to me, I could continue to lead my life as I had before. In fact, I'd be saved if I could admit I failed because of Philip's story. It is too big for me - even if it seems rather simple. It's as if I keep forgetting something every time I try, an essential detail, as if I'd lost a sign that would lead me to the right path. I know how often I've sworn and lied to myself like a drunk who deceives himself with a last glass. I am a gambler on the brink of bankruptcy getting dealt another hand— I'll make one last attempt, I'll resurrect the events one more time and then I'll leave it at that.

I was driven by my desire, yes. I, too, have my obsessions, of course, and like everybody else I prefer to keep them to myself. Not because I am ashamed, some things simply don't fit the image I have of myself which now, midway through my life, is the same as what my fellow human

beings have of me: I'm a man with many weaknesses and even more principles. But Eros does not ask about the images we hold of ourselves, on the contrary, often it seems as if he is trying to refute them. Everybody has their dark side, they say, but now I realize how little that is meant in a moral sense to most people, that darkness need not be equated with evil or light with good. The dark side is simply that which lacks light, and it took me a long while to understand that cats actually are black at night, so not only do they seem black, no: they lack all color. How did I come up with that? Oh, yes: my obsessions. Here I have to think of the confessions of Rousseau, whom I'd read a few years ago, and who, if I recall correctly, begins by saying he is writing a completely honest report about himself, omitting nothing intentionally, and that which he couldn't talk about simply fell by the wayside. And I remember how little I believed in his resolve, had thought it was mere stylization, lip service as they say, and I doubted the author until he documented his sexual preferences. I can't remember how he put it, I only remember how it struck me and that from then on I believed his assertions. So do I need to reveal my perversions for my report to be credible?

Some aspects of Philip's story are embarrassing to me, and I don't mean just the weird, dirty and sick moments that can also be found in it. It is the inanity of certain details that I cannot accept. Much of them seem almost insignificant and downright mundane. It would have been far easier for me if these plum blue ballerina flats hadn't caught Philip's attention, ordinary slippers that no longer are reserved solely for dancers. They can be found in any department store for a small sum, sewn or glued, with or without straps on the instep, in every possible color, matt or shiny. And the fact that they were made of calfskin, finely crafted and carefully selected, does not alter the fact that this story begins with a pair of women's shoes.

The beginning? That's a tricky matter. Nobody can pinpoint the event that begins the story. In the beginning, God created heaven and the earth, so it is said - but what did he do before then? And whatever it was: why doesn't it count as part of the beginning? Physicists who replace God with the Big Bang would add that the question is absurd because it presupposes time, and such things did not exist before God or the Big Bang. Books and films claim there is a beginning, but in reality there haven't been any further beginnings since the very first one. And for the time being, there also is no end, if that's any consolation. One event flows into the next; but as the end of one story is related to the beginning of the other, it remains undetectable to the human mind. Those who wish to disentangle the fabric of reality will end up entangled in it. That's what I reject. I want to solve the riddle, but I don't want to go crazy.

I am a witness of those days of March, and as a witness I will report them fully and without embellishment. Some things will show me in a negative light, but it's all the same to me. In order to seem credible, I could omit something here invent something there. But I don't want to. My obsession, let it be confessed, my obsession is truthfulness. And whether it was laughable or not: the fact remains it was the plum blue ballet flats that triggered Philip's journey. Why did he follow them? I have no answer for that, it might have been a game, at least in the beginning harmless and without danger, because if Philip had known what would happen in the ensuing hours, he would have immediately let the woman go. He was not seeking his ruin, nor even

danger, although when the time had come and he realized the thread his existence hung upon, he faced the danger without hesitation.

One thing is certain: on that Tuesday, the 11<sup>th</sup> of March, at a quarter past four, Philip, a man in his late forties, heavysset, he'd grown somewhat out of shape in the last few years, had waited in a café on the outskirts of the old town for a certain man named Hahnloser.

Philip did not know him, he'd only heard that his painting business recently had gone bankrupt, which is why he had to sell a piece of land that had been owned by the family for generations, an undeveloped property high above the lake. Philip didn't approve of the meeting place, he'd have preferred his company's conference room, but when he saw he could make a quick buck, which he'd estimated would bring him thirty thousand, he had agreed to the rendezvous, since he had to be at Belinda's by around six in the evening and she didn't live far from the café.

The restaurant was located in a 19<sup>th</sup> century bourgeois palace, a former grand hotel from the era when the city had gone through a massive expansion, when the artillery hills had been leveled and the lakeshore filled up. Gold and red plush held sway over the ambience, a sweeping staircase led to the terrace, mothers sat with their children at tables covered with leftovers of sweets, empty syrup glasses and coffee cups. Hahnloser had kept him waiting and Philip was tempted to order a piece of cake from the vitrine, but since only five minutes remained until the agreed time, and since under no circumstances did he wish to be surprised with a full mouth, he contented himself with a cup of coffee with two bags of sugar stirred in.

Even ten minutes later, which would have been more than enough time to wolf down half a piece of cake in peace and quiet, Hahnloser was nowhere to be seen. He neither responded to the call, nor to the text message Philip had sent him. And after Philip had Vera confirm that he had the right number, Philip read through the latest news about the Malaysia Airlines aircraft, a Boeing 777, which had disappeared last Sunday somewhere in the Roaring Forties with two hundred and thirty-nine souls on board, a tragedy that preoccupied and troubled him.

In Kuala Lumpur the authorities didn't have the slightest clue what had happened to the plane. The search which had expanded by the hour into other areas remained fruitless. The passenger list contained not only Chinese and Malaysian names, but also the names of two Austrians, in reality Iranians, who had gone on board with fake passports. For several hours people believed the two were terrorists, until they turned out to be illegal immigrants and so even this trail led nowhere. Nobody had found the rubble and the oil spill from the Strait of Malacca had been caused by the usual maritime traffic.

At some point, Philip decided to take a look around the restaurant, but he didn't see anybody who would have fit Hahnloser's description. When he returned to his table, his cup had been cleared away and a fat woman wearing a light blue cap was sitting in his seat. For a moment, Philip stood around there not knowing what to do. Finally, he grabbed his briefcase, paid at the register, took his change and stepped into the street.

Another fact that troubles me has to do with the city in which the events occurred. It is the same one I've inhabited for twenty years, a city I've come to know and consider home. When I walk past the places where Philip picked up her trail, see the places where his fate was sealed, those calm, peaceful places, I see how improbable it is to find such a story here. The citizens are industrious and don't tend towards extremes. Life goes on quietly. The battles fought here are rarely exemplary and rarely fatal. If the lifecycle of a typical inhabitant were to be recorded as a straight line drawn from birth to death, the result would be a flat line, with no peaks or valleys, a steady striving towards one's own end, interrupted here and there by a few irregularities, tremors caused by illness or divorce. Rarely, past the age of forty, will an existence end any differently here than by gradually fizzling out, which perhaps is the wrong term, as it presupposes a burning. Few people are on fire. It's more like a moderately filled balloon slowly running out of air. Yes, there is misery here, too, just as everywhere else, people live here, too, who torment others, as well as people, who suffer. Here, too, one occasionally hears of those pitiful old folks, who one day stumble over a piece of furniture in their apartment, fall and remain lying on the floor, too weak to call for help, who die of thirst in their own bedroom, unnoticed, until a few months later, they are discovered because a sweet smell has spread throughout the house. But only the dead are lost, as long as you are alive, you cannot remain undetected. Nobody can hide, and if you hear about people who have been hiding from the police for years or even decades, like the crook who lived on a farm in southern Italy and ran his syndicate from there, writing his instructions and orders by hand on tiny shreds of paper in microscopically small letters, which newcomer had been admitted into the organization, when a traitor had been killed, or how a territorial dispute should be resolved, then it always will be met with astonishment and complete lack of understanding by the people in this city. A person who lives that inconspicuously would surely cause people to talk and soon such talk would reach the authorities, and the person would be exposed. One is watchful, but one shouldn't believe we are in command of some special awareness, or even have an interest in our own city, or fellow citizens, no, generally speaking, indifference is the name of the game, a carefully maintained and decent ignorance of a stranger's and one's own state, and already a hundred and sixty years ago, it had been noted elsewhere that the people here had the ability to tell all sorts of fantastical stories and legends with the greatest precision, yet knew nothing about how it went down when their grandfather took their grandmother. Much has changed since those days, the city has become a popular destination in the world, all kinds of international business people spend a few years enjoying themselves here and living off the fat of the land without feeling the need to put down roots or make it home.

It was unlikely that a person like this Philip would choose another fate and, within a few days, not to say hours, would bring himself from a solid, secure existence to the brink of his own destruction. One could imagine these incidents occurring in an area torn apart by internal tensions, where people are accustomed to such ruptures, passions, in a society where conflict is part of everyday life - but what can I do? That's simply how it was, yet another inconsistency in Philip's story and I have to live with that.