

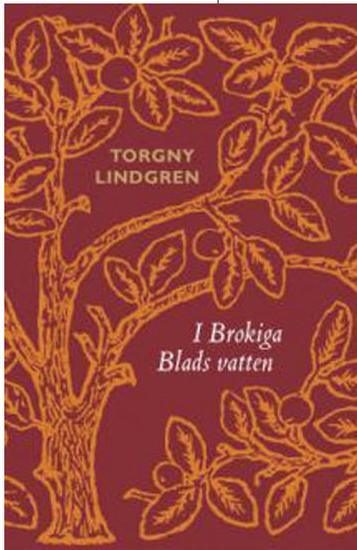
from:

In Streaky Leaf's Water

Torgny Lindgren

introduced and translated by

Chris Hall



I Brokiga Blads vatten,
Norstedts, 1999

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Torgny Lindgren, from Raggsjö in northern Sweden, is one his country's best known writers. Over a literary career spanning sixty years he has won numerous awards for his work, including the Swedish National Book Award (1983), the August Prize (1995) and the Gerard Bonnier Prize (2001). He was elected to the Swedish Academy in 1991.

Whilst he is also one of Sweden's most successful writers internationally, it is more than ten years since a translation of his work was last commissioned and published by an English-language publisher – *Hash* (Pölsan), translated by Tom Geddes (Overlook Duckworth, 2004).

This apparent neglect in recent times of a large proportion of Lindgren's work is all the more surprising given the modern-day predilection for the dark humour of which he is an undoubted master. With a technical virtuosity underpinning his simplistic, *faux-naïf* style, Lindgren's remains a unique voice in the world of Swedish literature – and a revival of his work is long overdue.

This particular excerpt is taken from a collection of short stories entitled *I Brokiga Blads vatten* (*In Streaky Leaf's Water*) published in 1999. Here, with characters as diverse as the biblical figures of Lot and his wife, the composer Gustav Mahler, the Swedish painter Prince Eugen and a farmer trapped between East and West Germany, Lindgren takes reality and stretches it to, and sometimes beyond, its limits. A key constant within these apparently disparate tales is the author's exploration of the relationship between art, or indeed artists, and life – a hefty theme which nevertheless greatly benefits from the humour and lightness of touch which have become his hallmark. Integral to the same motif are the notions of struggle and powerlessness, which find expression, for example, in the eighth of the untitled stories in the volume, the first half of which can be read in translation below.

The heavy front door moves with dignity and restraint; its three hinges are not in any hurry, nor indeed is the door panel itself or its carved surround. They are as old and experienced as the man in the black and grey checked overcoat who, with a liver-spotted hand, has turned the key in the lock and, with his right shoulder, set the door in motion; it opens inwards creating a gap through which the man is able to squeeze himself, he moving as slowly as the door, perhaps even more so; it takes him four whole steps before he is properly inside. After the fourth step he pauses, now able to listen to the movement of the door as it closes behind him: the dull groan of the hinges, the melancholy wheeze of the pneumatic door-closer, the calm and self-assured click of the latch.

Here in the warm stairwell he suddenly notices that the rain, the lashing rain out there, has brought out a smell of wool and mothballs and perhaps old age – yes, most certainly old age – from his coat and possibly even from his body; he recognises the smell from childhood – every old person smelt like that: musty, damp and rotten – the child in his memory feels queasy at the stench of old age, his old age, in the midst of which he now finds himself, the child in his memory having accompanied him there. Five footsteps further on to the stairs, oh those long-suffering stairs, and he takes those five steps exactly as planned – out in the street, on approaching the doorway, where he had carefully thought them through one by one – sliding and dragging his feet, yes, but nevertheless determined and never faltering. Only his third and fourth steps cause him any concern; it is as if his self-confidence is about to desert him, not to the extent that he actually stumbles, but enough for him suddenly, and with a thrilling sense of disquiet, to be consumed by the notion of his left foot being about to slide away or collapse beneath him at the very moment of it being called upon to bear the weight of his limp and shapeless body. Finally at the staircase, he uses both hands to grab hold of the cast-iron snake's head at the end of the banister. The cold head of the snake now in his hands – he can distinctly feel its fiendishly protruding tongue in his right palm – he stands and waits. Ahead lies the staircase, behind him the stairwell previously trodden, conquered even, where the faint echo of his shuffling feet is still perceptible and where the glass ceiling lamp fails to illuminate all corners of the room, creating instead a featureless cone of light which seems to hang from the marbled plaster above.

He has just come from the funeral director's, having arranged a service. Edith is dead and must be buried; a long time ago, several hundred footsteps ago, he was at the funeral parlour. Now he has the staircase in front of him. The stairs are indifferent; they have no interest in whether or not he manages to prevail over them. Those he defeats will be no different from those he is yet to surmount. Yesterday Edith was carried downstairs; going down can also be trying and difficult, but it requires less energy.

Still with the scabrous head of the snake grasped firmly in his right hand,





he allows his left to dangle out in front of him. This helps him to distribute his body weight such that he is able, without too much exertion or pain, to lift his right foot onto the first stair. Then he tilts his body forwards, first checking that his foot, ankle and knee are ready to bear the enormous weight of his upper body, then taking the step for real, his first step; wavering somewhat and with a grim foretaste of dizziness in his mouth, he does actually accomplish this. He stands and waits for a few moments, now having let his right hand slide away from the snake's head and upwards along the smooth, brass banister to an anchor point more suited to the requirements of his new location. There are nineteen stairs; he must pause for a while, to ensure that his blood flow, breathing and conscious state keep pace with the rest of him, that he maintains his equilibrium and inner harmony throughout the entire climb. The second stair, which now rises steeply and defiantly before his feet, must be attacked just as systematically and purposefully and with the same determination as the first; he must not for a second lose sight of his method, his strategy: the grip on the banister, the dangling of the arm, the forward tilt of hips and trunk. With a groan, he masters the second stair, his lips tightly pressed, his cheeks tense and trembling – and not only that, but also the third, the fourth and the fifth; all the time, his mind is filled with but a single thought: that his limbs, those unfathomable marvels, must obey him, that they must remain loyal, faithful and disciplined, that they must submit to his plans and estimations, and subordinate themselves to the grand scheme that is the conquest of the staircase.

On the fifth stair he waits; for a brief moment, he believed himself about to find a rhythm and a pattern of movement which would carry him all the way up and onwards to the hall rug, its original flower-pattern now worn away, and from there to the smooth oak door – but a ripple of pain, a jabbing sensation of discomfort in his left shoulder and upper arm, forces him to stop; it is his heart – he knows it is his heart – a mild spasm that can come about through over-exertion or worry, through vain desires or fear; so he is forced to take a break, to gather new strength – he must show patience, he must not be rash. He leans carefully to his right until, through the shoulder padding in his coat, he feels the support of the tiled wall, at the same time moving his left foot slightly forwards to release the pressure on his right knee and foot arch; whilst performing these adjustments he suddenly feels a disturbing coldness, a throbbing, icy sensation in both feet, as if the silent indifference of the marble staircase has flowed up through the soles of his shoes. His feet must not let him down: his entire frame is dependent on those feet.

It was her feet that were Edith's downfall: they failed her, she allowed them to give up. He bought her shoes with rubber soles, but they were no help. During the last five years, Edith never managed the stairs on her own. She lacked the required stubbornness and strength. Her feet overcame her spirit. He recalls the giant sloth, or mylodons, as they were perhaps called, how their feet became ever weaker and smaller until in the end the beasts simply gave up and disappeared, still wearing their checked overcoats; they died out a long time ago. And he thinks of the powers of endurance and perseverance that he possesses within himself, that he has always possessed within himself: this inclination to climb, this irrepressible will to bear himself upwards. Life

Pölsan, Norstedts, 2002 was reviewed by Tom Geddes in SBR 2002:2.

Merab's Beauty, translated by Mary Sandbach, was published by Harvill in 1989.

Other books by the author translated into English by Tom Geddes, all published by Harvill:

Bathsheba, 1988

The Way of the Serpent, 1990

Light, 1992

In Praise of Truth, 1994

Sweetness, 2000

itself. The wall, which with supreme apathy and disregard, now offers support to his right shoulder; also offers temptation, rest offers temptation; he must keep moving. Edith always just sat completely still, with a blanket wrapped around her feet.

Now, still standing against the wall, he lifts his left foot onto the sixth stair; then, leaning forwards, grabs the banister again with both hands before heaving himself up. Though the banister bends slightly, it does so in a forceful, trustworthy manner; besides which, this is evidently a practical and efficient technique: allowing the arms to bear a large share of the burden whilst cunningly and observantly making use of one's surroundings, the banister in particular. With a sense of both curiosity and joyful discovery he attacks the seventh stair: his strategy is working! Yes indeed, even with this clumsy, clinging, over-dependent approach, he is able to climb, he can carry himself upwards! The seventh stair, the eighth, the ninth and the tenth; yes, it is possible, it is doable, he is doing it! He counts the stairs, he knows he is halfway now, from the outset his goal has been to make it at least halfway, 'half done is well begun'; so on the tenth stair he waits; he needs to regain his strength, and to deliberate with himself.

What if someone comes? Strangely, he has forgotten to consider the possibility of someone coming and finding him here on the stairs, halfway up. Exposed to the cruel desolation of the staircase. Someone who sees it as their duty to intervene. Someone who is not fully prepared to accept his sovereignty, his right to defeat the stairs with his own strength. Someone who grabs hold of him to give him support.

Well, then he must simply defend himself, assert his personal right to decide. To begin with, he can make use of his face, his old, glacial, dismissive face. Then he can slip in an elbow, his free left elbow. And he can speak of course – in the most extreme of emergencies, he could even speak.

He stiffens. With nine stairs remaining, stiffening up is dangerous. Most palpable is the stiffness in his legs and back which veers between pain and numbness. There is no question of him giving up; no, the idea of stopping halfway is not in the least bit tempting.