

TOMAS TRANSTRÖMER

Upright

Translated from Swedish by Patty Crane

In a burst of concentration, I succeeded in catching the hen and stood with it in my hands. Strangely, it didn't really feel alive: stiff, dry, an old white feather-riddled woman's hat that shrieked out truths from 1912. Thunder hung in the air. A scent rose up from the fence boards, like when you open a photo album so dated you no longer know who the people are.

I carried the hen to the enclosure and let her go. Instantly she came back to life, recognized herself and ran according to the rules. A hen yard is full of taboos. But the land all around is full of love and resolve. A low stone wall half-overgrown with leaves. When darkness begins to fall, the stones shine softly with the hundred-year-old warmth of the hands that built it.

Winter's been hard, but it's summer now and the land wants us to hold ourselves upright. Free but careful, like when trying to stand in a small boat. Which brings back a memory from Africa: on the banks of the Chari, many boats, a very friendly mood, the nearly blue-black people with three parallel scars on each cheek (the SARA tribe). I'm welcomed aboard—a canoe of dark wood. It's surprisingly unsteady, even when I squat. A balancing act. If your heart sits on the left side, you have to tip your head slightly to the right, nothing in your pockets, no large gestures, all rhetoric must be left behind. It's true: rhetoric is impossible here. The canoe glides out on the water.