

Gunnhild Øyehaug

Two by two

At ten minutes to one one night in November, Edel loses it. She has been standing by the window with her arms crossed since ten past twelve, alternately looking down the drive and then at the watch on her wrist. Some time before this, she lay on the bed clutching a book to her chest with her eyes shut tight and felt good, strong and completely open. Then she got up to clear the snow, so that Alvin could drive straight into the garage without having to stop and clear the snow himself first. She wanted to reach out to him - that was the expression she used when she thought about what it was she wanted to do; it was a cliché, but that was OK, it was what she wanted. She imagined her own small hand reaching out and being taken by Alvin's hand, Alvin's big, strong hand. Her eyes filled with tears when she thought of their two joined hands and everything they symbolised. And clearing the snow - it dawned on her that clearing the snow symbolised that she was making room for him again. She was making room for him again after he had asked for forgiveness and said that from now on, she was the only one, there would be no others; she had let him stay in her life as Thomas' father, as someone she shared her home with, someone she refused to look in the eye at the breakfast table and whose shoes she occasionally kicked as she passed them in the hallway. She shovelled and cleared the snow and as she shovelled, she looked up at the double garage and thought that it symbolised her goal, she was clearing the way for him - she was the garage that he could come home to. Her small car was already parked on one side of the garage and when his car was on the other side, things

would be as they should be. Her small car parked alongside his big car. She ran up to the garage through the uncleared snow and turned on the light and looked at her little car that was standing there all alone, waiting, and then cried as she cleared the rest of the driveway to the garage. That was forty minutes ago. And it is snowing hard again now, snowing so much that it looks like the snowflakes are falling together, two by two, three by three, four by four, falling through the air until they land suddenly and mutely in the snow. In only forty minutes, the driveway has been covered again. And the man that she cleared the way and made room for is not here and the fact that things are not as they should be screams out at Edel. He should have been here forty minutes ago. The last ferry docked at twenty past eleven and it takes three quarters of an hour to drive here from the ferry - and that's being generous. In other words, he should have been here at ten past twelve, when she finished clearing the snow and stood waiting, red-cheeked, by the window with a magnanimous, nearly loved-up look on her face.

Every minute that passed after ten past twelve pulled this look of love from her face, like a net being dragged from the water, and by the thirtieth minute past twelve, when she called his mobile and heard it ringing in the breadbox in the kitchen, her face was no longer remotely magnanimous. She screamed with rage, she, who had felt no rage one hour earlier as she lay on the bed feeling good, strong and open and then decided to get up so she could clear the snow. At that point, in the thirtieth minute past twelve, there was nothing left in the body with the crossed arms that was in any way still touched by the good, light magnanimity she had felt blossom in her heart just over an hour ago, as she lay on the bed and read *Birthday Letters* by Ted Hughes. The English poet Ted Hughes

wrote the book for his deceased wife, Sylvia Plath (also a poet). In the book he expresses his love for Sylvia, who took her own life largely because she felt that this love was lacking - she believed that he did not love her, that he was unfaithful, which he was, and on 11 February 1963, she put her head in a gas oven and took her own life. And in the years that have followed, the English press and many others have held Ted Hughes responsible and criticised him for not talking about it, for not expressing any regret, or even asking for forgiveness, nothing. He has received prizes for his poetry, but people look at him with eyes that no doubt clearly express what they really think of his behaviour. Edel is one of those who have held it against him. She loved Sylvia Plath and she has borne a grudge against Ted Hughes. Though she has found some solace in the fact that even among famous poets there are those who share her experience. She, a small bookseller in a rural community, can recognise herself in a famous poet, Plath - there are bonds between people, she thought; even successful poets in big cities wander around in their own homes in desperation, even they rage and throw things against the wall. The fact that they cried and felt small, small and betrayed, that they wanted to be stones that would sink to the bottom and stay there, was a huge relief to her. It was awful that Sylvia had suspected Ted and was right. Because that meant it is possible: to suspect and to be right.

But then she read *Birthday Letters*. With great resentment, she picked the book with the red poppies on the cover from the cardboard box of books that she had ordered and with great reluctance she opened the book and read the first poem. She did not know how it happened, but as she read the book, it struck her: even though he betrayed her, he must

have loved her, he saw her, saw all the big and small things that she went around doing and feeling - and if only she had known that, Sylvia, as she went around doing all those things that she did not think were noticed! When she got to the last poem, she discovered that the red poppies on the cover referred to this poem about the red poppies that Sylvia had loved and seen as a symbol of life; and this evening, as she, Edel, lay on the bed reading this last poem, she felt she was the one who saw all this for her, in a stream of warmth and the dark timbre of the voice that saw and said, that twisted and twisted down and down until finally she could barely breathe, suffocated by a pressing joy, or sadness: This is Life, You are Loved and You are Betrayed in That, That is Life, I must Accept It, I Accept It: Life is Good, Painful and **Awful!** She thought to herself: This is Acceptance! The notion of "acceptance" radiated inside her like the sun suddenly staring through the clouds, forcing them open and covering the fjord like an iridescent bridal veil. This is God, thought Edel, and she felt like she was about to explode; she clutched the book to her breast and closed her eyes and felt completely open. She also felt overwhelmed by something else and had to scribble down some words on a piece of paper: "the power of literature".

The reason that Edel let go of this good, magnanimous feeling, of the notion of "acceptance", and has now lost the plot instead, is that she cannot see, but suspects, the scene that was unfolding in a house by the ferry around the same time that she was clearing the snow from the driveway, 45 minutes drive from the double garage at the end of the driveway. The scene that Edel suspected when she lost it, but could not see, looked like this: her husband, Alvin, was standing behind Susanne,

who lives in the house that stands alone by the ferry, 45 minutes drive from the double garage. They were both naked, Susanne was bending forwards and holding on to a window ledge. Alvin was standing behind her and holding her hips. Alvin thought to himself that this was not what was supposed to happen, this was not what he had intended, he should have driven straight home, he should never have called in on Susanne, just to say hallo, to find out if she was very sad because he had stopped coming, if she had been alright in the last six months, and to say that it was difficult, nearly impossible, just to drive by her house when he finished work, to say that he stood up on the bridge of the ferry and tried to see if he could see her inside every evening when she had the lights on and it was dark all around, and her house twinkled at him like a small star in the night sky, but that it could not carry on, he had a family to consider, Edel had threatened to leave him and take Thomas with her and he could not bear that, he had to sacrifice their love for Thomas, that was just the way it was, that was what he wanted to say, he wanted to take responsibility for his family, that was what he had chosen, having spent a long and painful period thinking and doubting, he could not come in and stand here like he was now, holding her by the hips and pressing his cock between her legs.

Thomas – for whom Alvin was going to sacrifice his love and not stand as he is standing now, for his sake - is asleep. He has been out all afternoon selling raffle tickets in the snow and spent the whole time thinking about Noah's ark, which he learnt about at school. He thought about giraffes and leopards. He thought about rhinoceroses and dreamed of stroking them and sitting on their backs, touching their horns. He thought about

how enormous the boat must have been, as the teacher said yes when he asked if it was bigger than the hotel. He wondered whether there were also two ants onboard. And two lice! And now he is lying curled up like a small foetus, dreaming about crocodiles. Because there were crocodiles onboard, he had asked about that. He is dreaming about a big crocodile that has laid a crocodile egg in a nest, while Edel storms through the sitting room and pounds up the stairs to the bedroom. She throws on a pair of trousers and a sweater, puts on a pair of shoes and hurls *Birthday Letters* at the wall as hard as she can. Alvin comes all over Susanne's buttocks. In the crocodile nest, the first baby crocodile breaks through the hard shell of the egg. A rhinoceros stands for a long time looking at another rhinoceros, then suddenly walks away, out of the ark's big front door and the rhinoceros that is left behind does not know why. Thomas shouts to Noah: wait! Wait for the other rhinoceros! He tugs at Noah's tunic. Then he runs towards the door to bring back the rhino that has walked away. The one that was left behind falls to the ground with a great thud.

Thomas stands in the doorway with tousled hair.

"Something went bump, Mummy," he says.

"It was a book that I threw against the wall," replies Edel.

"Why did you throw it against the wall?" asks Thomas.

"I was angry," says Edel. "It was a bad book. A terrible, terrible book. Put your clothes on, Thomas, we have to go and get Daddy."

"Why?" asks Thomas.

"His car has broken down and he can't get home. Hurry up," she says, and Thomas says that he does not want to, he has to sleep! If he does not

go to sleep now, the rhinoceros might leave forever!

“You can dream in the car,” says Edel.

“But I might not dream the same thing!” says Thomas.

“Of course you will. Come on, I’ll help you get dressed,” she says and takes him firmly by the arm, her whole body shaking.

“I want to dream the same thing!” whines Thomas.

Susanne is shaking. She stammers. “Alvin,” she says and turns towards him, wanting him to put his arms around her. “I love you,” she whispers into his neck. “I knew that you’d come back.” He holds her tight but says nothing. “I can’t say it,” he says finally. “You know I have said that I can’t. It would be wrong. It would build up your hopes, you know I would love to...but Thomas...” She nods and looks at him, he can see that she is not entirely happy. But she tells herself that she can cope with anything and that he must be able to see that, on her face, how big and generous she is. Maybe that will make him understand that deep down, he loves her and that it would be impossible, impossible to leave her. She looks at him with an understanding expression on her face.

“Bloody hell, I have to clear the snow again,” shouts Edel. “Bloody, fuck, shit, shit!”

She drives through the village through the snowstorm, her windscreen wipers racing furiously back and forth and a triangle of snow builds up under one of them, in a while she will no doubt have to get out and brush it off. Triangle! Naturally, a symbolic triangle had to appear right in front of her eyes! She snorts, Ted Hughes, she snorts, that she could be so

stupid. Oh, Life - right. Oh, **Terrible**, Oh Good, Oh Pain, it is none of that, it is pure and simple lunacy and shit. And the outside is just bodies, skeletons packaged in flesh, doing this and that and nothing makes sense. That, thinks Edel, and laughs a sad laugh aloud for herself, is what I will say at the seminar on Monday. "Muuuummmmyyy," complains Thomas. She has woken him, he is lying across the backseat with his duvet over him. She let him lie down without putting the safety belt on. "Go to sleep," she says. She has been taking courses in English literature at the college in the next village and up until now has enjoyed the course, "Symbolism in literature." She felt that it was true that you should not scorn symbolism and simply look at it as antiquated, romantic thought, things should make sense, the expression and the content, she believed that something could stand for something else, a rose for love, an ocean for life, a cross for death, but now it just irritates her, because now she realises that of the two lanes on the road along the fjord towards the ferry, only her side has been cleared, she immediately thinks: is that how it is, is that what this means, is his path closed, will he not come back, is it only she who can reach out to him, and he cannot reach her, is his lane full of snow, is that how it is? She feels helpless, is that what this means? No, she refuses to read it that way! It is just a road, she thinks, a stupid road, without any symbolic meaning. Crap and idiocy, and on top of that: asphalt. She wished she had a furry dice hanging from the mirror, or a Wunderbaum, the most pointless thing she can think of, when she gets back to the village, she will stop at the petrol station and buy a Wunderbaum, to remind her of this, to mark this evening when she said goodbye to symbolic thinking and to - what, what else is she going to say goodbye to? Her marriage? But she is on her way to collect him, why,

why is she doing it, should she rather drive back home and lock the door, let him sleep in the garage, should she stop driving, should she just stop, why did she react in this way, it had to be the least reflected thing she had ever done, she just did it, and what should she do now, should she carry on driving? She slows down as she swings into a wide bend, she sees an orange light pulsing in the trees on the other side of the road, it must be a snowplough, she is frightened of snowploughs, she comes to a near standstill and lets the snowplough sail past on the other side of the road, the snow blasting over the barrier on the other side and hitting the trees and tears come to her eyes, spontaneously, *because now his lane is also being cleared.*

Alvin looks at Susanne's face, the pleading in her eyes makes him feel ashamed, he kisses her on the cheek and goes to look for his pants.

"What have you been up to recently, then?" he asks and Susanne tries to hold in her stomach as she picks up her bra from the floor. "Not much, same as always really... no, hang on..." She has thought of something.

"Give me a second," she says and with a sparkle in her eyes, she pulls on her nickers and practically runs to the CD player. Alvin thinks suddenly that there is something helpless about her body dressed only in underwear, as she bends down to put on some music, he feels like he can't breathe, he tightens the belt on his trousers and pulls on his jacket.

"Susanne, I'm going to have to go. Edel will flip if I'm not home soon, I'm sorry, Susanne," he says. But Susanne does not listen to him, she has put on a CD of salsa music and starts to dance in front of him. He must not go. She must get him to stay. She must get him to say something nice to her before he goes. "I've been going to salsa classes!" she says and dances closer and closer to him, with a provocative, slightly coy look. She

takes him by the hands, he says 'nooooo' ... then she lets go and turns her back to him, as she rolls her hips. She is a bit nervous, so her dancing feels contrived. Alvin is so embarrassed on her behalf that he goes over to the dancing back and puts his arms round her and says that he really must go now, but that she's good at dancing, and she should carry on with it. "I'm a fool, Susanne," he says. "No, you're not," she says. "You are the best person I know." He kisses her on the forehead. "I might go to Cuba soon," she says, even though it is not true. "Well, I hope you have a good time then," he says.

Edel shakes her head, she does not want to think about it anymore, she does not want to interpret things symbolically any more. We have rejected nature, that is what we have done, thinks Edel, as she drives slowly forwards on the newly cleared road and the snowstorm gradually dies down, yes, nature has been abandoned and we are to blame, we have focused on language and become complicated. We have to get back to nature, we have to stop reading books, we have to stop interpreting everything, we have to stop thinking figuratively, we have to live like animals, we have to eat food and sleep. We must renounce symbolism. We must stop thinking all together. We must live in one simple dimension. Ah! She is happy. She feels mad. Or perhaps she has actually been mad up to this moment and has now regained her sanity. She has a horrible, crystal clear feeling in her head. As if her head is two wide-open eyes with a cold wind blowing into them. She shakes her head. Your husband has fucked another woman this evening. She wants to laugh. And so we have to stop thinking symbolism! Haha. Jesus! She mumbles. And then laughs again. What a thing to mumble. In fact she wants to cry. She has to pull in

to a bus stop and cry. Imagine, she thinks as she leans forwards over the steering wheel, crying, imagine if it's not what I think, but that he's been in an accident. She looks over her shoulder at Thomas, he is sleeping, lying with his face to the back of the seat and she can only see his hair sticking up from duvet, a small fan that spreads across the pillow and she thinks: then he will be fatherless and she will be a single mother and she leans over the wheel again.

Alvin cannot quite understand what has happened. He drives home along the fjord, it has stopped snowing, the branches on the trees on the mountainside are weighed down, the road is white, no one has driven here since the snowplough, no tracks in the snow. The street lights stand silently with bowed heads off into the distance, he imagines the noise that is made when the light from each street lamp hits the roof of his car as he drives past, *bzzzzzzzzzzt*, he imagines that they are x-ray beams that penetrate the roof of the car and illuminate him, so that if you were looking in from outside, you would see a skeleton sitting there holding the wheel and driving along the road. Out of the light: a man. In the light: a skeleton. On, off, on, off. In a kind of corny, grey light, you can now see his right hand with all its white bones moving like tentacles, gripping the gear stick and changing gear. And then he dresses the skeleton up in bluish-red muscles, veins and sinews, just as he remembers from that picture in the anatomy book at secondary school that made a lasting impression on him: a person without skin, only muscles, veins and sinews. Teeth without lips, eyeballs without eyelids. Sometimes it comes back to him, like when Edel was shouting and screaming and saying it was over, he could only just hear what she was saying, he stood there

staring at her, he imagined her as a face without skin, only bluish-red, knotted muscles in her cheeks, over her lips and teeth. He feels hot, flushed, conspicuously flushed, and it will not have died down by the time he reaches home, he knows that, because he has done it before, he should really take a long detour when he gets to the village, but that will not be of much help either as then he will get home even later and Edel will know, maybe she will have packed the suitcase on wheels like she did the last time - the good, big red suitcase on wheels - and then remembered that it was a gift from him and stopped right in front of the front door, opened the suitcase and taken out all the clothes, then kicked the suitcase across the floor so that it hit the chest of drawers and lay there open like a gaping mouth, just like last time, and then run up into the attic and searched and searched until she found the old bag that was the bag she brought her clothes in when she moved in with him, as she had last time, to make a symbolic point to herself that she was on her own again, and then woken Thomas up and gone down to the hotel; maybe he smells of perfume, he thinks, thank god he took her from behind, touching as little skin as possible from the waist up. It was really only the lower part of his stomach that had touched her hips. He pictures Susanne's salsarolling hips and feels sick. He stops the car, in the middle of the road, gets out of the car, leaves the door open and walks to the edge of the road, turns around, stretches his arms out from his body and allows himself to fall backwards into the snow. It is soft. If he lies here for a while, he will cool down. He will lie here and slowly but surely erase Susanne from his mind. Because now he can feel it in his bones, it is over.

Susanne pulls on some sweat pants and opens a bottle of wine, she sits

down in the sofa and tries to think that she has just had a visit from her lover and that she is a grown woman with a rich life. She managed to get him to come. He could not stop thinking about her. He could not get her out of his mind - that's how strong the power is that she is fortunate enough to possess. But she knows there is no point. She tries not to think about the desperation that drove her to dance salsa for him. She tries not to think about the embarrassed look on his face when she wanted him to dance. She drinks the glass of wine in one go, swallowing only a couple of times. It tastes of alcohol. Susanne purses her lips and goes over to the phone, looks up the number of a travel agent in the telephone directory. She just doesn't understand, she thinks, how Alvin, the best person she knows, who is so sensitive and observant, who has told her the strangest things about what he thinks, could just come like that and fuck her and then leave with an embarrassed, hard expression on his face. She feels it, deep down, that he will not come back. It is over this time. She hopes he has an accident. She hopes he has an accident and ends up in the fjord. She dials the number for the travel agent. He could quite possibly have an accident with all this snow. The travel agent is shut and will open again tomorrow morning at 8am, and she throws herself down on the floor. She wonders if she should slide her way over to the sofa, she lies on the floor and pictures herself wriggling exhausted and doomed like a soldier on a muddy battlefield, over to the sofa - but she knows that it is not true, the truth is that she is lying on her back on the floor, that she is looking up at the ceiling, that the back of her throat is burning and that the tears are running from her eyes down into her ears.

"Please," says Thomas. The missing rhino has not come back and

Thomas is not allowed to leave the ark. Noah is so big that he nearly reaches the ceiling and he says firmly that it is not possible to go out, it has started to rain so they have to shut the door soon. Thomas tries to get to the door all the same, but the floor is heaving with baby crocodiles, so he slips and falls and never gets to the door. Now he notices that there is a lift like the one at the hotel beside the door and he can see that it is on its way down, because the floor numbers are showing on a panel above the door, and he thinks that maybe it is the rhinoceros, 2, 1, pling: it is two lizards. The lizards waddle over the baby crocodiles. Edel lifts her head from the wheel. She starts the car and swings out into the road. "Bloody shit," she mumbles.

Bloody, fuck, shit, *shit*.

Alvin has made an angel in the snow, which he realises is a great paradox, symbolically. It makes him think about Edel, it makes him want to cry, without managing to, he sits up, pulls up his knees and sits huddled in his own angel. A pathetic, overly symbolic position, thinks Edel as she pulls up beside him before he has looked up. He looks up. He is not surprised to see her there. She stops the car, gets out and stands in front of him. "What's happened?" she says. He shrugs his shoulders and opens his hands. Closes them again. "This," he says. "I made an angel in the snow." "You little shit," she says and nearly starts to laugh, she is not reacting as she thought she would, she had imagined the scene and it was not like this, she shouted and cried and then he fell to the ground, but now it almost feels as if she is not here and the whole thing is slightly comical. "We're finished," she says, without feeling anything and then goes back to sit in the car, her head feels crystal clear and cold, nearly

light. Her feet feel light as well. "The car broke down!" he shouts, coming after her. "Bloody hell, Edel! I've been standing here for nearly an hour! And I couldn't phone you because I couldn't find my mobile! I've been sitting here waiting for help but no one came." The crystal clear, light Edel smiles. "I would have liked to see that," she says. Alvin says nothing, but gets into his car and his hands shake as he turns the key, because now it is over.

But the car does not start.

The car just manages to splutter a few times but does not start. "There you go," says Alvin. Edel says nothing. The blood is about to leave her legs and rush to her head, her cheeks. She looks at him, coughs. Nothing that is happening now is as she had imagined. She does not know whether it is true or not. "Get out the way," she says and sits down in the driver's seat of his car, it is cold, so he cannot have just stopped, he must have been there for a while. It is cold in the car. She turns the key, the car barely reacts. It is true. The car has broken down. She does not know what to do. She has driven along the fjord to collect him, to shout at him and leave him, or collect him, or leave him, and her side of the road was cleared of snow first, and then his side was cleared, it hits her, that actually happened. It literally happened. She goes round to the boot and gets out a towrope and hands it to him. Alvin stands looking at Thomas who is sleeping in the backseat and tries to behave like someone whose car has broken down and who has been waiting in the snow for an hour. "What's he been up to today?" he asks, casually, and coughs. "He learnt about Noah's ark and sold raffle tickets," answers Edel. "Come and look

at him," says Alvin. Edel stands beside him and looks in at Thomas. He is lying asleep with his arms stretched out above his head, up the back of the seat. In the same position that Susanne is now lying on the floor, without knowing that the painful pressure she feels in her heart is that same pressure that is in Edel and Alvin's hearts right now, as they stand there side by side.

Edel drives the small car and tows the big car, which Alvin is steering. She refuses, she thinks, to interpret this symbolically. It's just the way things have turned out. They drive along the fjord. It's night. There are three of them. And the fact that there is a rope between the cars has no significance other than the physical fact that when a car breaks down it needs to be towed. I just don't understand this, thinks Alvin. He feels that he is being watched, as if someone is laughing at him: he said the car had broken down, and that is what happened. He got exactly what he asked for. He leans forwards towards the windscreen to see if he can see the stars, but is blinded by the light from the street lamps, which stand silently with bowed heads, illuminating the cars as they pass. At regular intervals along the road, you can see a skeleton, an adult, sitting at the wheel, then a child's skeleton lying across the backseat and then finally another adult skeleton, which is sitting more or less directly behind the first. The adult skeletons have their arms in front of them, holding the wheel, the child skeleton is not holding anything but has its arms stretched out above its head.

You can also see a larger skeleton, standing on all fours, which has a huge horn on its snout; it is standing beside the child skeleton. A

similar skeleton now appears from the left, to the surprise of the first rhinoceros skeleton, because it lifts its head and looks expectantly at the approaching rhinoceros skeleton. They stand for a moment staring at each other and then the one rhinoceros rubs up against the other. A couple of antelope skeletons wander past and a tiger skeleton and a lion skeleton and further along, two small cat skeletons and then dogs and a mass of small crocodile jaws that nibble the child skeleton's legs, making it laugh and wriggle. And if x-rays could also show the contours and shape of other things that were not of solid, indisputable mass, you would be able to see the outline of an enormous wooden boat, with pairs of skeletons, two by two, on many levels, two for each sort of animal. A big human skeleton lifts its arm and then everyone feels what they are standing on leave the ground and float through the air.