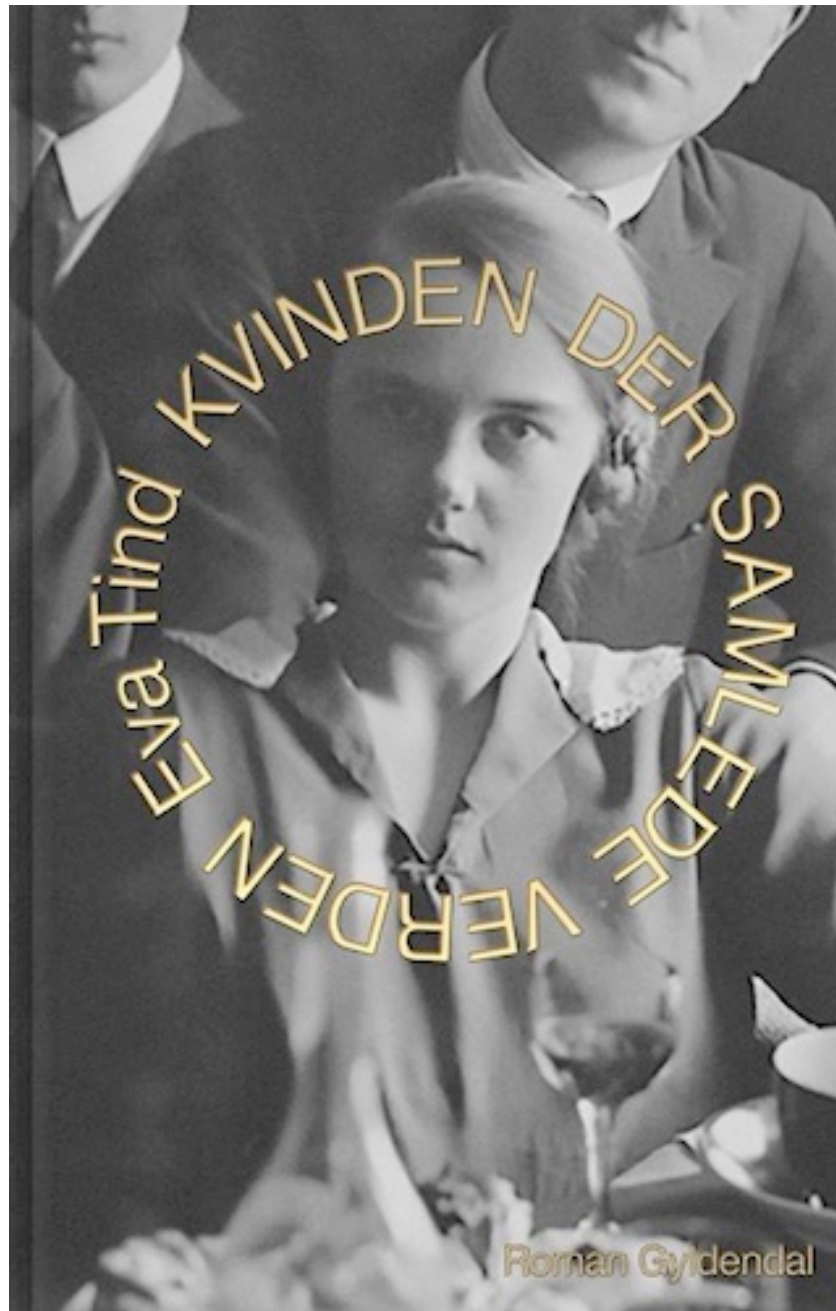




contact: trude@immaterial.no



Eva Tind
THE WOMAN WHO JOINED UP THE WORLD

Translated by Martin Aitken

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PROLOGUE
1948

Peder is a warm clump at Marie's breast. The nipple has slipped from his mouth, his cheek is spattered with tiny droplets of milk, and it is as if the whole world's frailty lies in his small, wrinkled face. Marie's gaze wanders, through the pane and into the garden, where the grass and plants remain verdant, though the leaves on the trees have begun to yellow and will soon release, that the wind may blow them to the ground. The sky is above it all. There are two ways in which to study the universe: one may journey into space and risk one's life, or else journey into the invisible microworld whose space is quite as vast and infinite, she thinks to herself. In her earliest youth she would have scoffed at the notion that she would concern herself with such minuscule, barely discernible trivialities as moss mites, yet as if in a single, seamless movement she has quite imperceptibly become obsessed by them.

'If a person fails to devote themselves to their profoundest interest,' she whispers to Peder, 'happiness will surely elude them.' The warmth from his little head radiates as if from a sun. It stabs at her heart to think that she is about to leave, but she is in no doubt. She knows she must go.

1907-1921

COPENHAGEN, KOKKEDAL, NIVÅ

1907

Marie and Aase lie washed and ruddy on the mattress. The white linen is smooth and stiff. They originate from a single egg which thirteen days after fertilisation divided into two. Nonetheless, Marie is regarded as the eldest, for it was she who emerged first. The siblings came to number seven sisters and one surviving brother. Løn is the eldest, aged three, Trolden is eleven months younger than Løn, Bitten a year younger than Trolden; then come the twins, Aase and Marie. After them, Alma will give birth to the dead brother, and after him to Manse, then to Søster, and finally to Tutsi.

Marie wriggles; she cries into Aase's face, and Aase into hers. Their crying can barely be separated, for they cry with a single voice, its volume rising and falling, but no one comes to comfort them; their siblings hop about everywhere, stroking and nipping the helpless twins by turns, their faces bobbing before them like medallions, and Marie and Aase squirm and wail, until sleep descends as suddenly as from a knock on the head, muscles, tendons and all else relaxing at once. As yet, each is unable to distinguish itself from the other.

1911

Marie and Aase are four years old when their parents, Niels and Alma, move from Copenhagen with their five young daughters into a large white detached residence north of the city. The winter has delivered unusual amounts of snow. It has stopped now, but frost still crawls across the panes, depositing its icy flowers on the inside of the glass. The house is in the Italian style. Along its north face, icicles hang like the sharpest teeth from the gutters. It is from this house of rendered brick, with its tall white columns, that Marie's first memory hails, like some rather blurred photograph. It is her father, Niels, whose image she sees. Marie has recalled it so many times that it has become

ingrained and cannot ever be removed. Her father, seated in an armchair, smoking. His back is straight, and a book rests on his thigh. His clothes fit stiffly about his frame, giving an impression of discomfort. He blows blue smoke from between his lips; it collects in a dense cloud around his head.

Though Niels is quite a young father, he wears a long, greying beard. His eyes are deep holes into which one would not wish to fall. He tries to exclude the voices of the children, which blare and grate in his ears, and to avoid the greasy fingers that stain and pull his stiff garments out of shape. His words when addressing the children are detached and dispassionate, a gate opening into the field of ungraspable knowledge that elevates him high above the lingering cloud of blue smoke beneath the ceiling. Niels is a mathematician. He teaches at the gymnasium school and at home gives out his knowledge as if it were white sugar lumps he were placing before them, small, rough-edged cubes that slowly dissolve in the mouth, melting into oceans of sweetness that swell through the body and make the eyes gleam.

Marie wishes only this: to hold the ocean in her mouth.

Outside the windows, soft snowflakes descend once more, though the wind remains settled.

‘Come on,’ says Løn, brushing bright little dandruff scales from Marie’s dark-blue dress.

‘Where to?’ Marie replies.

‘It’s Sunday.’

Løn takes Marie’s hand. They scuttle down the corridor. On Sundays they are allowed into the family library, where time dislodges like flesh from the bones that simmer in the pot on the kitchen stove, steam rising up from under its lid, collecting in beads of moisture on the ceiling, droplets releasing and falling one by one: one year, two years, three years. Sundays are like pearls on a string. Løn, Trolden, Bitten, Aase and Marie descend onto the Turkish carpet in the library, roll onto their tummies and bury their faces so fully into the bulky volumes that the stuffy smell of paper and dust sticks in their noses. They leaf their way around the world, wandering page by page through these illustrated works, into the habits and customs of unfamiliar peoples. Marie’s heart beats the same rhythm as Aase’s, two stones striking together, a spark, and a thought germinates in Marie’s mind: I shall travel the world.

She looks up at the globe on the desk.

‘Can a person walk around the world?’

‘No,’ Trolden mutters back. ‘There are oceans in between the continents.’

‘What are continents?’

‘Gigantic islands sticking up out of the sea,’ Trolden replies.

Marie closes her eyes, which revolve behind their lids; the world is a shining globe, suspended behind her brow. She fixes it all in her mind, opens her eyes, closes them. And thus she persists, opening her eyes, turning the pages, closing her eyes, storing the illustrations from *Brehms Tierleben* that she may call them forth at any time and project them onto the screen of her eyelids.

‘Do you see what I see?’ she asks Aase.

‘Yes.’

Marie sees directly into a dream: she is walking alone, all the way around the world.

‘I don’t want to go around the world on my own,’ says Aase.

‘Why not?’

Her eyes move agitatedly behind her eyelids. But they remain closed.

‘I only want to go if I’m with someone.’

‘You’re ruining my dream,’ says Marie.

‘You’re ruining my dream,’ Aase echoes.

Now the globe turns faster.

‘I see green water, coral and fungi with thick brown stalks, rumpled like the stems of palm trees, some dashed with orange spots, others quite pale or knobbly, with tufts of hair.’

Marie swims.

‘Among the rocks, starfish lie hidden like decorations among waving sea plants; they peep out like *aquacoral*,’ says Aase.

‘Aquarelle or coral,’ says Trolden.

‘Coral,’ Marie repeats. The word tastes like an ice cream.

The Earth turns even faster.

‘If you go, I’m coming with you. The two of us must stay together always,’ says Aase.

Marie looks into Aase’s eyes as if they were her own.

‘Yes,’ she says.

But she does not see herself and Aase walking together; she is on her own.

‘Who’s he?’ Aase asks, pointing at a picture of a bust carved in marble.

‘Thales of Miletus, who lived some five hundred years before the birth of Christ,’ Niels explains, leaning closer.

Their father’s beard tickles, a soft pillow on which to rest one’s head.

‘Thales of Miletus said, All is water! Instead of considering nature to be something mysterious, he believed that it had to be observed in order to be understood.’

Marie stares at the picture of Thales of Miletus; his eyes are white and round like boiled eggs that have been shelled, and now the whole room smells of egg.

‘I smell eggs,’ says Aase.

‘Is he blind?’ Marie asks.

‘All statues are blind,’ Løn replies.

Marie needs a wee. She goes from the library, down the corridor, through the door, to the lavatory. Though she feels her bladder to be urgently full, she proceeds slowly and with eyes closed. Her fingertips know every room, every surface, but to go here and be blind is to go here for the very first time. She hurries now, her fingertips gliding over the limewashed walls. How dark is it anyway inside the head of a blind man? A shadow descends and intuitively her eyelids snap open. Perhaps she would rather not be blind. She lifts the lid and the rank smell of toilet rises abruptly from the bowl as if at the lash of a whip. She breathes in through her mouth and releases a thick, warm jet of urine. The smell clings to her nasal hairs. When she has finished she runs back along the corridor to the library, the streaming air rinsing the obnoxious odour from her nostrils. She settles next to Aase and prods a finger into her side, but Aase does not react, merely turning away from her, taking with her the book she is looking at.

‘What’s a straw robber?’ Marie asks.

‘Someone who steals other people’s straw?’ Bitten suggests.

‘It’s amber,’ Løn replies. ‘It says so there.’

‘When amber is polished it becomes magnetic and will attract straw. The Persian word for amber means “straw robber”,’ Niels says.

‘What’s magnetic?’ Marie asks.

The word reminds her of Magna, the neighbour woman with her three long bristles, obstinate whiskers half-hidden in the shadows under her chin.

‘Magnetism is when two separate things are attracted to each other. Imagine a little rod with a south pole at one end and a north pole at the other. If the north pole of the rod points at the south pole of another, the attraction between them will be so great that they will stick together as one. But if you turn the rod the other way, so that south pole meets south pole, or north pole meets north pole, the rods will repel each other,’ says Niels.

‘Like you two,’ says Løn. You behave like two little rods, always stuck together.’

‘Pull them apart and they’ll spend the rest of their lives trying to join together again,’ says Niels to Løn, as if Aase and Marie were no longer present.

Words fly from their lips, and Niels flies after them, airborne.

‘The Greek philosopher Empedocles claimed in the fifth century BC that the Earth and the universe comprised four elements: earth, fire, air and water, which in turn were subject to two forces he called Love and Strife. Union and separation are two connected forces.’

‘We’re not rods, we’re people,’ say Marie and Aase as one.

‘And we don’t think the same,’ says Marie.

‘Exactly,’ says Aase.

Marie puts two invisible plugs in her ears and turns to a book about the peoples of the world. The savages of New Guinea look back at her from the page with the teeth of wild boar in their noses and birds of paradise on their heads for decoration. She turns the page and Africans dance with fat tails dangling against their bare buttocks. She slips into these foreign worlds, and now it is she who wears the paradise bird.

‘Is that ...?’ Aase asks, pointing into the book.

‘... a real live bird,’ Marie nods.

‘Look, Marie!’ Aase’s voice rises.

The live savages with the teeth of the wild boar in their noses stand before them. Aase takes off her clothes to stand naked before Marie. She winds long blades of grass around her upper arms like great pompons, binds ferns tight above her coccyx. They strut like a bushy tail. Strings of beads hang from around her neck, and she grabs a hat and puts it on.

‘You’ve got a live bird of paradise on your head,’ says Marie, her eyes wide.

The bird spreads its colourful wings. It blinks, and the wild boar tooth in Aase’s nose lifts, but it is Marie’s nostril that tickles.

Aase wiggles about, Marie throws back her head and splutters with laughter; then, abruptly, the look on her face changes, her eyes now keen as an eagle’s, and she gathers her fingers into a beak and strikes.

‘Ow,’ says Aase. ‘Stop that!’

She yelps and hits out at Marie.

‘I won’t,’ Marie hisses, and wraps her arm around Aase like a snake.

They roll around the floor between blades of grass and ferns, the paradise bird flaps into the air and squawks, and Alma comes running.

‘That’s quite enough!’ she cries. ‘Get up, both of you. What kind of behaviour is this?’

‘We’re just playing, that’s all,’ says Marie.

‘It’s only for fun,’ says Aase.

Alma narrows her eyes, looking first at one, then the other.

‘Well, it’s time to get dressed,’ she says.

1912

The night is a wolf with only a single yellow eye that never blinks. When the wolf rises, the day slips away between its legs, like all days before it. Sleep-drenched bodies squirm in opposition to the light. Cold, clammy cloths wash sleep and grime from the body’s every cranny. The children wee and poo, rinse and gurgle, brush their hair and put on their clothes to sit at the long table in the kitchen, where their mouths open and shut so quickly it looks as if they are wide open the whole time.

‘You look like baby birds. The only difference is that no sooner have you eaten than your beaks begin to droop. Sit up straight and put your chests out,’ says Alma.

‘We’ve got something to tell you,’ says Niels.

‘We’re moving,’ says Alma.

That very second, the hands of the old grandfather clock stop at seventeen minutes past six. The clock, which normally ticks the rhythm of the day as conspicuously as were it situated in their own auditory canals, stands utterly silent against the wall.

‘Moving?’ say Marie and Aase as one.

‘Where to?’ says Løn.

‘There’s a war broken out in the Balkans. It can spread. We’ve bought a farm so we can provide for ourselves.’

Alma puts her hands to the small of her back for support. She is pregnant again. Manse still clings to her leg like a sack of potatoes. He is too heavy for her to want to lift him up.

‘The name of the farm is Løvbjerggård,’ Niels says.

‘Where is it?’ says Trolden, prodding his porridge.

Aase and Marie spring from their chairs.

‘Nivå.’

‘Are there lions?’ Marie growls, baring her teeth. Aase has put on her invisible fern tail again. She sashays around the table.

‘Løv, not *love*,’ says Løn.

‘Løv is the leaves that hang from the trees,’ says Bitten.

‘Are we going to have animals?’ Marie asks.

‘Yes, we need to be self-sufficient,’ says Alma.

‘And the land has seven ponds on it,’ says Niels.

‘Seven mudholes full of insects and vermin, hooray,’ says Trolden sarcastically.

Niels looks at her coldly.

‘And hens!’ says Aase.

‘And eggs,’ says Marie.

‘Yes, they come with the hens,’ says Løn with a smile.

‘What about our things? How are we going to move them?’ Marie says.

‘We’ll pack everything into boxes with the exception of the furniture, and then a lorry will come and move it all for us,’ says Alma.

‘How will we take the house apart?’

‘Marie, dear, the house stays where it is. We’ll live together with all our things in the new house.’

Marie lifts her gaze and surveys the table: seven dishes filled with dark brown rye-bread

porridge. Seven mudholes are seven ponds, she tells herself. She hunches over her porridge and licks the edge of her dish clean. The brown porridge is now fringed by a white, gleaming circle.

1915

Løvbjerggård farm has whitewashed walls and a newly thatched roof. A sweeping moraine formation swirls luxuriantly about the house and barn. The fields surround the seven ponds. Every row of beet ends at one, and the countryside is no longer a picnic destination but grows now wild about the family, the farm and animals, upholstering them without and within. They are nourished by the animals and the crops in the fields. Teeth cut and tear, crush and chew, and the mouth swallows it all. The children tie bundles of twigs together and ride them like Red Indians on the warpath, and sometimes they are allowed to sit on the great plough horses when they come home from the fields. The thick, living skin against their legs, the notion that such enormous power would submit to the human will, is dizzying.

Marie grows up in the countryside, from the countryside. The grain sprouts in her, and then the harvest comes. Alma and the girls toil; bathed in sweat, they drag the sheaves away under impenetrable clouds of dust that rise as if after an explosion. The dust invades their noses and ears. Mice and rats scurry and scuttle in their hundreds, having gorged themselves and multiplied all winter. Mice dart at their feet, into trouser legs and under skirts. Løn, Trolden and Bitten are armed with spades.

‘Ow!’ Trolden cries as a mouse scampers up her leg as if it were a tree, leaving behind a pattern of tiny scratches that trickle blood.

The children run this way and that with their spades and shovels, beating the rodents senseless, chopping off their heads, legs and tails. The stumps writhe. The floor of the barn is specked with blood.

When the girls stop for lunch and the last mouse has concealed itself in the tall grass, Manse pokes his head into the barn. He wanders among the corpses, poking them with a stick to see if he can make them twitch. At one point he stands still, bends down and picks something up before going away again.

‘Where’s Manse?’ says Aase.

‘I’ll find him,’ says Trolden.

‘I’ll find him too,’ says Marie, and follows on the heels of Trolden.

Manse is sitting behind the barn. His body is hunched like a pent roof over the object he is hiding: a slimy, blood-soaked corpse of fur and tiny intestines on the ground in front of him.

‘Manse, what is it?’ says Trolden.

‘A mouse,’ he replies.

‘It’s horrible,’ says Trolden. ‘Leave it alone.’

‘But it’s dead,’ he says.

‘Yes,’ says Trolden. ‘That’s why.’

Manse turns away.

‘And what’s that?’ asks Marie, indicating a detail in the fleshly little lump of flesh.

‘The guts,’ he says.

Manse pokes at a dark and bloody entrail. Marie stabs at it with her finger, and the same

does Aase.

It's a rest day, but Alma has fruit to be boiled and preserved, the ever ravenous livestock must be fed, the stable-gutter needs scraping.

'The cows are hungry whatever day it is,' she says.

Alma picks up the sweeping brush and Niels takes the children on a Sunday outing. Today they go to Malmosen. The long grass licks at their legs. The meadows are at their prettiest in June, when the cottonsedge flowers and their swathes of green are abloom with its white, fluffy tufts.

'They look like little sheep on stalks,' says Marie.

When Niels smiles, a warmth spreads in Marie's chest. She senses the calm that comes over him, the stillness that settles in him when he and the children flit about in search of insects and flowers.

'Look for the sundew,' says Niels. 'It hides among the peat moss.'

'Is this it?' Trollden asks, pointing out a stalk with broad, blue-pointed leaves.

'It's got red leaves around a yellow rosette. It's carnivorous,' he replies.

'I've found one,' Trollden cries, handing the little plant to his father.

'Does it eat flesh?'

Marie hides her hands behind her back, but still it is as if she feels it nipping at the tips of her fingers.

'It gives out a sugary substance to attract insects. When they settle and begin to feed on it, they don't notice the leaves closing around them.'

Marie shudders at the thought, the tiny hairs on her arms rising like a downy forest, and at the same moment seven owls ascend into the air in two clusters. They come back in a circle before flying in over the wood and disappearing from view. Niels does not run on physical strength, but lives to read and think. His muscles are long, exhausted elastic bands that hold together his bones. The palms of his hands are not rough like other men's, but soft cushions, smooth as a child's, and now, unexpectedly, he grips her hand. His own is big and envelops hers, which is small and tender, like a mitten. Aase notices straight away and slips her hand into his own empty one. And there he walks, a father with his two small daughters in their chalk-white dresses, their flaxen plaits bouncing against their backs, and joy chimes like little bells in Marie's chest for the remainder of the day and long into the night.

Marie's notebook, 1916

The Earth is round.

The only planet with life on it.

The Earth nestles snugly and gives life to the Sun.

The Moon is important too.

It draws the tide over the Earth,
a blanket of fish and other animals.

Marie, Aase and Bitten are bored by the village school – the Bumpkin school, as they call it. Marie entertains herself writing various things in her little notebook. Things that must not be allowed to escape, which she wishes to remember or ponder. Occasionally, she will place objects between its pages. Photographs or things from nature. The pressed flowers, grasses and little insects possess a

fading beauty and disintegrate at the slightest touch. She is cautious with them.

Marie, Aase and Bitten labour in the endless furrows; their elder sisters seldom help, for they have their schoolwork to attend to, and the little ones are too young to do things properly. Bent double, they work through the summer in their gym slips. The beet is to be sewn, a field of potatoes to be earthed up, the soil scraped up around the green stems until continuous ridges are formed all along the rows.

‘It’s not fair that we must go here and dirty our toes,’ says Aase to Trollden.

‘We’ve only one pair of shoes each. Do you want them to be ruined?’ Trollden says. ‘Hey, Tutsi, gather the small potatoes up too.’

‘What for?’ says Tutsi.

‘Just do as I say.’

‘Why do we call you Trollden?’

‘Because I’m a troll.’

‘But what’s that?’

‘Someone with superpowers who eats people,’ says Trollden.

‘Am I a troll too, then?’

Tutsi looks worried.

‘Yes.’

‘And Mum?’

‘Mum’s a people-eater,’ says Marie.

‘A human who eats humans,’ says Aase, baring her teeth.

‘Are we people-eaters?’ says Tutsi.

‘In principle, yes, because Mum gave birth to us. But we’ve got so many potatoes we don’t need to eat anyone. It’s enough for the women in our family to have unimaginable strength,’ Trollden laughs.

‘And Manse?’

‘He’s a weakling,’ says Trollden.

‘But if we’ve got so much strength, why do we have to harvest potatoes?’ says Tutsi.

‘Not all people like trolls, so we must act normally and work hard.’

‘Come on, it’s time to eat,’ says Løn.

Trollden takes Tutsi by the hand; they trudge towards the house, between the long rows of green tops.

Alma is standing on the step, her eyes scouring the fields. She can’t see the girls from the farm.

Marie signals to Aase and at once they veer off towards the biggest of the boggy ponds in their identical homemade dresses; one troll becomes two. Their hands are blistered, their shoulders weary; the sun blazes, its flames lick at their skin until it burns like fire. Aase throws herself down in the grass. Marie gathers a great armful of leaves and presses them down in the cool, stagnant water. She places the wet leaves on Aase’s sunburnt shoulders and throat. She covers first her back, then her brow, cheekbones and nose. The leaves dry quickly in the sun. Aase lies quite still, her muscles relax, her face smoothes over.

Mare and Aase lie in the grass, face to face with the tiny creatures of the pond. Marie’s eyes latch onto a large group of dancing back swimmers suspended beneath the surface, sucking in air before disappearing down into the murky waters and vanishing from sight. The lightning-quick, beetle-like

whirligigs flit, silvery and glistening, above water plants that wave gently like dark green manes of hair. Marie watches them, only to dizzy, her eyes moving like spirals.

‘They look like little motor boats,’ she says to Aase. ‘They go so fast it makes your eyes wobble.’

‘Trollden says they’re called the Devil’s ducks, because when the Devil found out God had made the ducks, he loved them so much he wanted to make some of his own, and that’s why he made the whirligigs. They came out rather small, but on the other hand they have a compound eye so they can see above water and below,’ says Aase.

‘Look, what’s that?’ Marie says, pointing at a strange, long-looking rear end pointing up out of the water.

‘It looks like an upside-down scorpion,’ says Aase.

‘Do you think it bites?’ Marie asks.

‘No, I think it’s breathing through it.’

‘Like through a straw?’

‘Yes. Marie, if you love all animals, do you love that one too, even if it’s so hideous?’

Now the train toots; its sound is a pointed arrow of air that sticks in the eardrum. The invisible line between the train and the ear is an escape route.

‘I just want to get away from here,’ says Marie.

‘I don’t want to waste my life on beet,’ says Aase.

‘Let’s run away,’ says Marie.

‘Where to?’

‘Just away.’

‘You need a plan.’

‘What for?’

‘You need to know what you want,’ says Aase.

‘I know what I want,’ says Marie.

‘What?’

‘To study.’

‘Me too, I can’t wait,’ says Aase.

‘And to travel,’ says Marie. ‘To travel the world.’

‘You’ve so many ideas. How will you afford it?’

‘Mum went to Greece when she was eighteen. One of her brothers went to South America and another one to North America. I’ll go somewhere to, I’m sure of it.’

‘You mustn’t go anywhere. We’re to be together always. Swear on it!’ says Aase.

‘Cross my heart,’ says Marie.

‘That’s not enough.’

Aase pulls a little knife from the pocket of her gym slip. She unfolds the blade. It glitters. She grips Marie’s wrist with a fleetness that surprises them both, and nicks the skin. Blood trickles.

‘Ow, what are you doing?’

Aase stares at her coldly. Or is it from Marie the coldness comes? Then she nicks her own wrist.

‘But we’ve already the same blood,’ says Marie.

‘We did have when we were born, but not now. We’ll grow away from each other if we don’t watch out.’

‘It’s not a deep wound,’ says Marie, and presses her wrist against Aase’s.

'You're mad,' Marie says with Aase's voice.

One day the planet was pulled from the
 primordial sea,
but where does it come from exactly? Was it propelled from
the innards of the Earth
 like flaming volcanoes.
Or did it run from the Earth's
 ears
 which like the oddest fleshflowers lie
 pressed between the pages of my notebook.
The lips of the volcano.
To listen to the Earth's whisperings without crying
 human tears
 are the same water as that
 of the primordial sea, my father says.

I run from home.
But although I run as fast as I can
Aase runs with me.