Mamrelund: Dead Man Walking

Hans Otto Jørgensen

sample translation from the Danish by Sharon E. Rhodes

rhodes.sharon.e@gmail.com

The Facebook updates of my sister-in-law, Ane-Grethe Kudsk, from October to November of 2017.

October 27th

Yet another load of cows is leaving our farm, our hearts weep because we have no tears left. After 41 years of doing our best for the animals, for everything to do with the farm, we've lost the battle. Along with the farm we've lost our rights to pretty much everything that has anything to do with self-determination. All we can do now is be grateful for our wonderful family, partners and friends and for the support and encouragement they've given us without which we wouldn't have had the strength to fight. We have to be out by December, but with the tremendous help of our close relatives we can say that 5 Åbakken will be our home. We hope justice and joy will come back to us.

November 8th

And so came the day that the last of the milk was milked here, after more than 150 years of cows in this place, what happens next?

November 8th

It's like a bad dream. Only much worse. You wake up from dreams, but this is happening. Take care of one another.

1950-1970

I keep falling into the hole left by bankruptcy.

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;

petals on a wet black bough.

Sylvia Plath

Jutland Highway

Knuth Becker's preface to *The Daily Bread* (1932) where the man, our hero Kai Gøtsche, is out on the road in the most miserable weather, autumn, wind and rain, to sell, trade, etc.; brooms or drive belts or axle grease for the farmers. The farmers whose everyday life, until quite recently, was his too and who, now that he's fallen, shun him like the plague.

Much as their dogs shun and bite him.

Much as he hates having to pass these biting mongrels in the courtyard of the sanctuary *farm*, before he reaches the main door, knocks and disturbs the peace.

He, Gøtsche, Kai Gøtsche, Jutland Highway.

We believed we were shielded by providence, we believed such a thing would never come to pass.

The lilacs are blooming

Lilacs in the ruin

My brother is going into bankruptcy, it's the last thing to happen that we didn't know would happen, *I* didn't know it would happen, we could not have anticipated this.

My sister's death and now my brother's bankruptcy.

When I think about it, my brother's life, his story, is *nobody's* story—his life and story are free-floating myth, dooming him to hang there in the dust of the barn for all time, the *empty* barn, after the cows are gone, after the last truckload.

He hangs in a shaft of light running down through the barn like the blade of a long knife stuck in an animal's neck.

The farm, like a living organism, breathes air. Inhales, exhales.

An animal whose days are numbered, more corpse than animal, who has lived, all along, on loaned time. And we, who believed eternity existed for our sake, that we might live from eternity to eternity, with great-grandmother and great-grandfather as the start, so far back in time that all we know is that the low houses were already there for grandfather to mercilessly tear down and build three full outbuildings, barn, storage shed and carriage house.

Someone said,

He'll break his neck

But he didn't break his neck

Only the main house, the new main house, in red stone, with three chimneys in a row, was allowed to remain standing.

And my brother, whom I believed entirely too serious about work, tore down the buildings he couldn't use and built new, larger ones, drained wet spots in the fields, and tore out stands of brush, bringing the fields together so that he could get to them with his big machines.

But I said nothing, I kept it to myself. I was comfortable, I wrote my novel, *The tower*, it took me ten years, and came out with a bang, and I got the Arts Council's three-year grant, etc., poets and big-city life in that order. But I feared it would end all wrong.

That he was going off course, that the investments were a mistake.

Great-grandfather and great-grandmother's farm—there's a grainy picture of it in the local historical archives in Glyngøre. It had moss on the roof and sloping walls and wasn't worth the match it would take to set on fire, a ruin, practically falling in on itself.

Grandfather expanded the crew, went from eight to sixteen cows and built a workshop and storage shed so ambitious that it wasn't filled for many years after it was finished. And he introduced new technology, the daredevil, his own mill on the storage shed roof, which rose dizzyingly high up above the new threshing floor, and the new quern and chaff cutter and soon after a pump in the well and a cistern on the vaulted ceiling over the barn, so the water came out of the tap like a song, giving drink to the animals, to the kitchen and the fireplace, for washday etc.

New land procured. The heath was broken up, wet spots drained, acidic soil neutralized.

But the economy was on his side.

All my greatness came from the farm.

But now we know what it means to be put out.

Now we know what it means to be without house and home, to have nothing.

No home, no security, no staircase and no one has to put on their overshoes, there's no doorframe to lean on.

Grandfather and grandmother on the hillside running down toward what they called Mamrelund.

Oaks of Mamre

And the cemetery. They became so lonely, great-grandfather and great-grandmother, grandfather and grandmother, the old aunts, my father and his sisters, and my sister, so lonely, abandoned in their graves. We're not there to care for them anymore, to watch over them, to talk to them and bind them to each other.

We believed they were well-kept, we believed they were together, but it was us, we bound them together by our mere presence.

In the cemetery where we had our our own area, our own plots.

And the church where worship services are held no more than once or twice a year, the church is laid waste too. Like a spaghetti Western, Clint Eastwood in a ghost town, abandoned graves, the wind sweeping over it. There's nothing for us to do about it anymore, we have no natural right to our dead.

Fuck fuck fuck.

My brother and sister-in-law were driven out like a pair of criminals, the worst criminals, as if they'd swindled their way into something that wasn't theirs, as if they'd stolen everything now being taken from them.

The farm, bit by bit. First the animals, their bread and butter, then the house where they had eaten and slept and loved and raised their children. And the garden where they'd celebrated, where they'd held bonfires and made twist-bread and heaps of pancakes.

Family, friends, neighbors.

The old garden with the big shady trees, the patio, the playhouse and the greenhouse, flagpole and clothesline and . . .

Oaks of Mamre

My brother was an expert pancake-maker. He worked with two pans at a time, Inge-Lise tossing in pats of butter that sizzled on contact.

I'd lived a life of exile in the city, away from the farm and the routines of work in the barn and the fields, but there's nothing left to be in exile from. The positions float, I don't know what's up or down anymore.

And mother, we can't stand to see her growing old, the wounds at her temple and the transplanted skin from her upper arms that won't heal. The bandages the nurse changes morning and night.

We can't stand it. That she's so exposed.

We never know what the future will bring, what will come to pass … the worst. Storm surges, everything flooded, or just a splash.

*

This morning: a first hint of fall. There's a chill in the air, thin and clear, the sun growing more distant, like the other stars, and the shadows are lengthening. The chickens are almost big enough, the first roosters can be slaughtered, the hens grow up never becoming more beautiful.

Deep sleep. Mother sleeps, Ben sleeps, the child sleeps.

It's first light when Andreas calls to say he's sorry on Ben's behalf and asks him to give his best to mother, that Ben understands, it's real. He's not dreaming.

The whole ship's going down, from man to mouse.

We'll call them Kris and Ann and Ben, the three siblings, and we'll call Kris's wife Inge-Lise. More are always coming along.

Inge-Lise lies sleepless, Kris wakes up. Today's the day they have to be out. There's no putting it off any longer.

The free world

Here is Inge-Lise and Kris's wedding photo. It's the one where they're posing with their dog. He's a lovely dog, a giant Saint Bernard. It's mostly hers, but Ben gave named him. He called the dog Churchill because he so precisely resembled Churchill. The only thing missing was the cigar.

Churchill is gentle as a lamb.

They're standing on the steps to the formal hallway, but the image is straight out of a western. It's idyllic, and the dog underscores this idyllic quality. And the power hidden within. She's in her white wedding dress and big, white sunhat; he's in his vest and white shirt with long hair and beard. As if he's just come in from the field, a settler, a pioneer in Wisconsin or Minnesota in the process of conquering new land, in the process of transforming the prairie into a waving sea of grain.

There's something unkempt about him. Strong arms and hands and broad nails, he's taken the day off, but there'll be work that must be done again tomorrow. And she: the broad brim of the hat. You have to shield yourself from the sun you see, from all of nature, all the chaos. But the dog watches out for her, keeps strangers away.

Railway workers, Indians, etc.

It was just a big puppy with giant padding paws and an enormous appetite. He accompanies her in the kitchen, when she's in the hen house gathering eggs. And after they have the little one, he watches over the pram outside the supermarket while she does the shopping.

Everyone called him Churchill. Without knowing why he was called that. But keep in mind: Ben was born in 1954, Kris in 1951, Ann in 1950, in the long shadow of the war. For their

father, Magnus, Churchill was the great hero, the man who'd won the war against Nazi oppression and gave them back their freedom . . . Churchill and Roosevelt, but Churchill first.

In a way they'd been part of The British Empire, that was how Magnus saw it, with the export of butter and bacon and the import of freedom and access to the world's oceans. It was permission to dream big, to sit with an atlas and, like explorers, wending their way along dark rivers through endless swamps and rain forests, to travel the continents, head swimming with the names, with the music of them. Wisconsin, Minnesota, South Dakota etc. Texas. And on the other side of the world Melbourne, Auckland etc., knowing it was all theirs.

But they knew the empire's day had passed and instead they'd become like a state in the USA, in the United States of America. Denmark received a share in the Marshall Plan that ought to have gotten Europe on its feet and that for them, for the Karstens in 1956, manifested itself in a mouse-grey Ferguson 31 which they shared with their aunt and uncle.

And they continued to share even after Kris had taken over the farm. Now with his cousin Kjeld. Together they owned a row cleaner and a root harvester and a hay baler, and they worked together and helped each other during the harvest and with taking up the root vegetables.

It wasn't until 1961, in the month of February and while Ben was in the hospital after being trampled half to death by a pair of heifers, that the horses were sent to the slaughterhouse. The two great Belgians, the gray, 21-year-old Musse and the brown, 23-year-old Hvidfod had—now that they'd gotten their own tractor, a red David Brown—become superfluous.

A wonderful team, Musse and Hvidfod, with whom their father had spent his days for all those years, since back before the war and the hard winters, day after day, rain and sun and wind, when there was plowing to be done, riding behind them with the reins on their backs. Together

they were a unit of power, Musse and Hvidfod and father, when there was sowing to be done, and when there was harvesting to be done, and they walked in front of the thresher or pulled the wagon home with a last load of hay.

Or when they were on longer trips and went all the way to Odense to get peet or down near Kildeborg for marl. Where they'd have a hamper of food and would fall into conversation with someone or other and hear the news. About who was getting married or expecting a new addition, soon it would become so tiresome that they just had to get home and would rather die and be freed from such torments.

It was Musse and Hvidfod, who Ann and Kris and Ben knew, who they were familiar with, who they could walk up to in the stable, or, as Anna had done before she'd even learned to walk, crawl in between their legs.

And Ben had sat in the manger with Musse and Hvidfod's great heads, looking into their big, gentle eyes and caressing their soft muzzles. Or he looked at their long yellow teeth when they drew their upper lips back and it was as if they were smiling at him.

But the Marshall Plan was not only the only means of modernisation and economic growth in agriculture, soon after came commitments in the form of NATO, and investments were made in the security of the free world. The house Ben and Judith now lived in had been built with funds from the same pool. A house with a flat roof and excellent light, something of the Alvar Aalto style, the modern thing around 1960. Pastels, yellow bricks and wood. Ben's partner at the press, Thomas S., always says it has a nice living room, that it has such a lovely view of the fields and bogs; and Joshua, who will not be called a boy for much longer, calls it their little paradise.

There are five identical houses, built by the defense of the commanders in conjunction with the barracks of Kongelund Fort, which, up until the 50s, had been armed with cannons and, together with a similar set up on Stevn Island, was meant to keep the communist Soviet Union away from our end of the Baltic.

As such, Ann and Kris and Ben are children of the cold war.

Churchill wrote prophetically in 1940 about the war's destruction and the victorious sun: *A terrifying panorama of destruction and ruins, of clouds of dust rising up form the collapsed cities and sinking again over the rubble as the victorious sun rises up in the distance over a silent ravaged world where there is nothing but heaps of stone left in the dead cities*.

But after the war, after the Soviet Union had developed the atom bomb, there would should there be another war, be nothing but destruction and humanity as such would be wiped out.

Their father was a rational thinker, he reluctantly set aside fantasy and trusted firmly and fully in the balance of terror. It was the surest thing. To bow even the slightest bit for the Reds was unthinkable.