

and in the days, weeks, and months to come, the traders from Lebanon would knock on his door and someone would tell them the owner had fled, leaving behind a trail of innocent prophets' deaths. Perhaps they would add that he had tried to destroy the gods that protected heaven and earth; the story would quickly cross Israel's borders, and he could forget forever marrying a woman as beautiful as those in Lebanon.



"THERE ARE the ships."

Yes, there were the ships. Criminals, prisoners of war, fugitives were usually accepted as mariners because it was a profession more dangerous than the army. In war, a soldier always had a chance to escape with his life; but the seas were an unknown, populated by monsters, and when a tragedy occurred, none were left to tell the story.

There were the ships, but they were controlled by Phoenician merchants. Elijah was not a criminal, a prisoner, or a fugitive but someone who had dared raise his voice against the god Baal. When they found him out, he would be killed and cast into the sea, for mariners believed that Baal and his gods governed the storms.

He could not go toward the ocean. Nor could he make his way north, for there lay Lebanon. He could not go east, where certain tribes of Israel were engaged in a war that had already lasted two generations.



HE WALKED FOR MANY HOURS, TAKING PATHS LONG since unused, until he arrived at the bank of the rivulet of Cherith. He felt shame at his cowardice but joy at being alive.

He drank a bit of water, sat, and only then realized the situation in which he found himself: the next day he would need to feed himself, and food was nowhere to be found in the desert.

He remembered the carpentry shop, his long years of work, and having been forced to leave it all behind. Some of his neighbors were friends, but he could not count on them; the story of his flight must have already spread throughout the city, and he was hated by all for having escaped while he sent true men of faith to martyrdom.

Whatever he had done in the past now lay in ruins—merely because he had elected to carry out the Lord's will. Tomorrow,



HE RECALLED the feeling of calm he had experienced in the presence of the soldier; after all, what was death? Death was an instant, nothing more. Even if he felt pain, it must pass at once, and then the Lord of Hosts would receive him in His bosom.

He lay down on the ground and looked at the sky for a long time. Like the Levite, he tried to make his wager. It was not a wager about God's existence, for of that he had no doubt, but about the reason for his own life.

He saw the mountains, the earth that soon would be beset by a long drought, as the angel of the Lord had said, but for now still had the coolness of many generations of rain. He saw the rivulet of Cherith, whose waters in a short time would cease to flow. He took his leave of the world with fervor and respect, and asked the Lord to receive him when his time was come.

He thought about the reason for his existence, and obtained no answer.

He thought about where he should go, and discovered that he was surrounded.

The following day he would go back and hand himself over, even if his fear of death returned.

He tried to find joy in the knowledge that he would go on living for a few more hours. But it was futile; he had just discovered that, as in almost all the days of a life, man is powerless to make a decision.



ELIJAH AWOKE THE NEXT DAY AND AGAIN LOOKED AT the Cherith.

Tomorrow, or a year from now, it would be only a bed of fine sand and smooth stones. The old inhabitants still referred to the site as Cherith, and perhaps they would give directions to those passing through by saying: "Such a place is on the bank of the river that runs near here." The travelers would make their way there, see the round stones and the fine sand, and reflect to themselves: "Here in this land there was once a river." But the only thing that mattered about a river, its flow of water, would no longer be there to quench their thirst.

Souls too, like rivulets and plants, needed a different kind of rain: hope, faith, a reason to live. When this did not come to pass, everything in that soul died, even if the body went on living;

and the people could say: "Here in this body there was once a man."

It was not the time to think about that. Again he remembered the conversation with the Levite just before they left the stable: what was gained from dying many deaths, if one alone sufficed? All he had to do was wait for Jezebel's soldiers. They would come, beyond any doubt, for there were few places to flee from Gilgad; wrongdoers always fled to the desert—where they were found dead within a few days—or to the Cherith, where they were quickly captured.

The soldiers would therefore come soon. And he would rejoice at their sight.



HE DRANK a bit of the crystalline water that ran beside him. He cleansed his face, then sought out shade where he could await his pursuers. A man cannot fight his destiny—he had already tried, and he had lost.

Despite the priests' belief that he was a prophet, he had decided to work as a carpenter; but the Lord had led him back to his path.

He was not the only one to abandon the life that the Lord had written for every person on earth. He had once had a friend with an excellent voice, whose father and mother had been unwilling to have him become a singer because it was a profession that brought dishonor to the family. A girl with whom he

had been friends as a child could have been a dancer without equal; she too had been forbidden by her family, for the king might summon her, and no one knew how long his reign would last. Moreover, the atmosphere in the palace was considered sinful and hostile, ending permanently any possibility of a good marriage.

"Man was born to betray his destiny." God placed only impossible tasks in human hearts.

"Why?"

Perhaps because custom must be maintained.

But that was not a good answer. "The inhabitants of Lebanon are more advanced than are we, because they did not follow the customs of the navigators. When everyone else was using the same kind of ship, they decided to build something different. Many lost their lives at sea, but their ships continued to improve, and today they dominate the world's commerce. They paid a high price to adapt, but it proved to be worth the cost."

Perhaps mankind betrayed its destiny because God was not closer. He had placed in people's hearts a dream of an era when everything was possible—and then gone on to busy Himself with other things. The world had transformed itself, life had become more difficult, but the Lord had never returned to change men's dreams.

God was distant. But if He still sent His angels to speak to His prophets, it was because there was still something left to be done here. What could the answer be?

"Perhaps because our fathers fell into error, and they fear we will repeat their mistakes. Or perhaps they never erred, and thus will not know how to help us if we have some problem."

He felt he was drawing near. The rivulet was flowing at his side, a few crows were circling in the sky, the plants clinging insistently to life in the sandy, sterile terrain. Had they listened to the words of their forebears, what would they have heard?

"Rivulet, seek a better place for your limpid waters to reflect the brightness of the sun, for the desert will one day dry you up," the god of waters would have said, if perchance one existed. "Crows, there is more food in the forests than among rocks and sand," the god of the birds would have said. "Plants, spread your seeds far from here, because the world is full of humid, fertile ground, and you will grow more beautiful," the god of flowers would have said.

But the Cherith, like the plants and the crows, one of which had perched nearby, had the courage to do what other rivers, or birds, or flowers thought impossible.

Elijah fixed his gaze on the crow.

"I'm learning," he told the bird. "Though the lesson is a futile one, for I am condemned to death."

"You have discovered how everything is simple," the crow seemed to reply. "Having courage is enough."

Elijah laughed, for he was putting words into the mouth of a bird. It was an amusing game, one he had learned with a woman who made bread, and he decided to continue. He would ask the

questions and offer himself an answer, as if he were a true sage. The crow, however, took flight. Elijah went on waiting for Jezebel's soldiers to arrive, for dying a single time sufficed.

The day went by without anything happening. Could they have forgotten that the principal enemy of the god Baal still lived? Jezebel must know where he was; why did she not pursue him?

"Because I saw her eyes, and she is a wise woman," he told himself. "If I were to die, I would live on as a martyr of the Lord. If I'm thought of as just a fugitive, I'll be merely a coward who had no faith in his own words."

Yes, that was the princess's strategy.



SHORTLY BEFORE NIGHTFALL, a crow—could it be the same one?—perched on the bough where he had seen it that morning. In its beak was a small piece of meat that it accidentally dropped.

To Elijah, it was a miracle. He ran to the spot beneath the tree, picked up the chunk of meat, and ate it. He didn't know from where it had come, nor did he wish to know; what was important was his being able to satisfy a small part of his hunger.

Even with his sudden movement, the crow did not fly away.

"This crow knows I'm going to starve to death here," he thought. "He's feeding his prey so he can have a better feast later."

Even as Jezebel fed the faith of Baal with news of Elijah's flight.

The two of them, man and crow, contemplated each other. Elijah recalled the game he had played that morning.

"I would like to talk to you, crow. This morning, I had the thought that souls need food. If my soul has not yet perished of hunger, it has something still to say."

The bird remained immobile.

"And, if it has something to say, I must listen. Because I have no one else with whom to speak," continued Elijah.

In his imagination Elijah was transformed into the crow.

"What it is that God expects of you?" he asked himself, as if he were the crow.

"He expects me to be a prophet."

"This is what the priests said. But it may not be what God desires."

"Yes, it is what He wants. An angel appeared to me in my shop and asked me to speak with Ahab. The voices I heard as a child—"

"Everyone hears voices as a child," interrupted the crow.

"But not everyone sees an angel," Elijah said.

This time the crow did not reply. After an interval, the bird—or rather, his own soul, delirious from the sun and loneliness of the desert—broke the silence.

"Do you remember the woman who used to make bread?" he asked himself.

ELIJAH REMEMBERED. She had come to ask him to make some trays. While Elijah was doing as she asked, he heard her say that her work was a way of expressing the presence of God.

"From the way you make the trays, I can see that you have the same feeling," she had continued. "Because you smile as you work."

The woman divided human beings into two groups: those who took joy in, and those who complained about, what they did. The latter affirmed that the curse cast upon Adam by God was the only truth: "*Cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life.*" They took no pleasure in work and were annoyed on feast days, when they were obliged to rest. They used the Lord's words as an excuse for their futile lives, forgetting that He had also said to Moses: "*For the Lord shall greatly bless thee in the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee for an inheritance to possess it.*"

"Yes, I remember the woman. She was right; I did enjoy my work in the carpentry shop. She taught me to talk to things."

"If you had not worked as a carpenter, you would not have been able to place your soul outside yourself, to pretend that it is a crow talking, and to understand that you are better and wiser than you believe," came the reply. "Because it was in the carpentry shop that you discovered the sacred that is in all things."

"I always took pleasure in pretending to talk to the tables

and chairs I built; wasn't that enough? And when I spoke to them, I usually found thoughts that had never entered my head. The woman had told me that it was because I had put the greater part of my soul into the work, and it was this part that answered me.

"But when I was beginning to understand that I could serve God in this way, the angel appeared, and—well, you know the rest."

"The angel appeared because you were 'ready,'" replied the crow.

"I was a good carpenter."

"It was part of your apprenticeship. When a man journeys toward his destiny, often he is obliged to change paths. At other times, the forces around him are too powerful and he is compelled to lay aside his courage and yield. All this is part of the apprenticeship."

Elijah listened attentively to what his soul was saying.

"But no one can lose sight of what he desires. Even if there are moments when he believes the world and the others are stronger. The secret is this: do not surrender."

"I never thought of being a prophet," Elijah said.

"You did, but you were convinced that it was impossible. Or that it was dangerous. Or that it was unthinkable."

Elijah rose.

"Why do you tell me what I have no wish to hear?"

Startled at the movement, the bird fled.

THE BIRD RETURNED the next morning. Instead of resuming the conversation, Elijah began to observe it, for the animal always managed to feed itself and always brought him the food that remained.

A mysterious friendship developed between the pair, and Elijah began to learn from the bird. Observing it, he saw that it managed to find food in the desert, and he discovered that he could survive for a few more days if he learned to do the same. When the crow's flight turned into a circle, Elijah knew there was prey at hand; he would run to the spot and try to catch it. At first, many of the small animals living there escaped, but he gradually acquired the skill and agility to capture them. He used branches as spears and dug traps, which he disguised with a fine layer of twigs and sand. When the quarry fell, Elijah would divide his food with the crow, then set aside part to use as bait.

But the solitude in which he found himself was terrible and oppressive, which is why he decided again to pretend he was conversing with the crow.

"Who are you?" asked the crow.

"I'm a man who has found peace," replied Elijah. "I can live in the desert, provide for myself, and contemplate the endless beauty of God's creation. I have discovered that there resides in me a soul better than ever I thought."

They continued hunting together for another moon. Then

one night when his soul was possessed by sorrow, he asked himself again, "Who are you?"

"I don't know."



ANOTHER MOON DIED and was reborn in the sky. Elijah felt that his body was stronger, his mind more clear. Tonight he turned to the crow, who was perched on the same branch as always, and answered the question he had asked some days before.

"I am a prophet. I saw an angel as I worked, and I cannot doubt what I am capable of doing, even if the entire world should tell me the opposite. I brought about a massacre in my country by challenging the one closest to the king's heart. I'm in the desert, as before I was in a carpentry shop, because my soul told me that a man must go through various stages before he can fulfill his destiny."

"Yes, and now you know who you are," commented the crow. That night, when Elijah returned from the hunt, he went to drink and found that the Cherith had dried up. But he was so weary that he decided to sleep.

In his dream, his guardian angel, whom he had not seen for a long time, came to him.

"The angel of the Lord hath spoken to thy soul," said the guardian angel. "And hath ordered:

*"Get thee hence, and turn thee eastward, and hide thyself by the brook Cherith, that is before Jordan."*

*"Thou shalt drink of the brook; and I have commanded the ravens to feed thee there."*

"My soul has heard," said Elijah in the dream. "Then awake, for the angel of the Lord biddeth me hence and is desirous of speaking to thee."

Elijah leapt up, startled. What had happened?

Although it was night, the place was filled with light, and the angel of the Lord appeared.

"What hath brought thee here?" asked the angel.

"You brought me here."

"No. Jezebel and her soldiers caused thee to flee. This must thou never forget, for thy mission is to avenge the Lord thy God!"

"I am a prophet, because you are in my presence and I hear your voice," Elijah said. "I have changed paths several times, as do all men. But I am ready to go to Samaria and destroy Jezebel!"

"Thou hast found thy way, but thou mayest not destroy until thou learnest to build anew. I order thee:

*"Arise, get thee to Zarephath, which belongeth to Sidon, and dwell there; behold, I have commanded a widow woman there to sustain thee."*

The next morning, Elijah looked for the crow, to bid him farewell. The bird, for the first time since he had arrived at the bank of the Cherith, did not appear.