

Blade of Hearts (Das Herzflorett) by Marica Bodrožić
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Speak, said Pepsi, as if it were the last time
you were speaking. Sing, said Pepsi, as if it were the last time
you were singing. If you speak and sing like that, said Pepsi,
you'll stay young forever.

I

The Letter, and the Alphabet's Obedience

As much as Pepsi loves the quiet of the village, she longs for people. She wants to get away from her relatives in sleepy Herzegovina, where she's treated like an orphan and gets scarcely enough to eat, sometimes nothing at all, and she wants to get away from her grandfather's farm, away from the Dalmatian south; she wants to go to the European north and eat her fill of something delicious at last, not just snack on someone else's leftovers. To her, life with her faraway parents is something precious. They live in Hessen, an area in the north, in Germany; that's what they told her. Once Pepsi learns the alphabet at school, she practises every day. She has only one thought in her head – a request that feels urgent to her. Just after her ninth birthday, she's ready: she asks her aunt Rosa at the other end of the village for her parents' address. She writes them a long letter. 'I'm starving here, no one gives me anything,' she starts it off, 'you have to come and get me, me and my brother and sister, we should all be living together.' Just after they were born, when they were eight or ten weeks old, Pepsi, her sister and her brother were left with relatives. Her mother would come back to the south from Hessen for the births, she'd have her babies and go back up north as soon as possible so she wouldn't lose her job. From one visit to the next, Pepsi always forgot what her mother looked like. All she could remember was her long velvety black hair, the hair her father had instantly fallen for when he spotted her in a church in Hessen as the Lord's Prayer was being recited. They married soon after, and every year they'd think that this year would be a good year to return south. But that longed-for good year never came. And Pepsi only knew them as people who came to visit, each time bringing with them a new illness, a new ailment, a new fear of dying. The bora blew fiercely as she walked through the overgrown gardens and took the letter, like a future already promised to her, to the postman. Her hair flew up in the air for a moment as if time were standing still, holding that blink of an eye firmly inside her, hinting at something in the future that already knew of her and awaited her, just in that little pause, without telling her anything more. Something fundamental was about to change for her, she could feel it, and a slight foreboding rose in her, a distant sense of something strange that felt both terrible and beautiful. Pepsi had written it almost without pausing for breath, that letter which would change everything. She'd triumphantly sealed the envelope with her spit and then gone into the village to the postman's house, determined and driven by an inner force that was new to her, a force she wanted to follow at all costs. On the path lined with unkempt, wildly fragrant herbs, she'd sung an old Italian song to herself, her favourite song of all, which she'd often heard on Radio Split and which she'd hurriedly taped with an ancient cassette recorder, missing the first few lines in her excitement. She listened to it over and over as she lay on her back in the meadow back then, chewing on a long blade of grass like a sweet, in a

childhood when learning and living were one and the same, and she was a deer in the void of life, a letter of the alphabet in the meadow of reasons, a rose chafer in the warm southern air. And later, when they all moved to a little town in Hessen in the north and left the south behind forever, granting the wish she'd expressed in her letter, Pepsi thought the sky of her childhood always had four faces, and the other two – west and east – were now missing. Leaving had robbed her of her grassy lookout, her green compass, which now realigned inside her and guided them all to a new and very different life together. Then, when there was a gathering with the elders – her parents – it was suddenly quite clearly and distinctly a life without almond trees and grass and without the freshness of the elements, and a life full of instructions that lay on Pepsi's heart like a great stone on a grave prepared for her far in advance, where spring took a long, long time to appear to her as nature. The isolation in southern Europe hadn't warned her, silent pleas were of no use now, and the past had passed; her own letter had painted her out of herself like a painter who knows precisely the power of his brushwork. The village, the meadow, the buzzing of insects all fell back in time and time itself became a border. Familiar with the old and at the same time approaching the relentlessly new, once Pepsi arrived in Hessen, she was already thinking about where she could go now and how she could get away from there again. The expanse of sky – reassuring, as if it were painted – has gone to such a depriving extent that very soon even the southern blue and the trees begin to miss Pepsi very bitterly too. As always, her sister rarely speaks, almost never, and she hides every emotion within herself. But her heart is deep inside her and it shines on Pepsi like a lantern in the night. She likes eating almonds and when she dares to speak, she just asks to be bought some. Pepsi begins to call her sister Heart-Almond. Her brother's very lively; he talks all the time. But his name is never said out loud; he's only ever called 'son', 'my son', 'my son', in both languages, by both parents. They call Pepsi and Heart-Almond that too. Although they're clearly daughters, it's just the same for them: 'oh my son, do this', 'my dear son, do that'. Pepsi always had a name in the south; she'd grown used to being a person you could call by her name. Now she's just a son, which she isn't. Even so, Pepsi looks around in Hessen. The world's as big and as good as the place where her feet have been standing since January 1983. Since then, everything's been new to her, all except the language that she knew from her mother's womb and that was already connecting her to the vocabulary of her future, there in the pool of wondrous sounds. Pepsi senses this quite precisely and winter's not her favourite season. But she carries on where she left off at school in the south: she learns poems off by heart. A neighbour she recites one to tells her about a poet who took her own life with a dagger. 'But you mustn't do that,' she says. And Pepsi nods. 'I'm just learning poems off by heart,' she says. But winter both makes Pepsi lonely and won't release her from its darkness. Of course she doesn't want to die, so she sees that everything in life is an opportunity to say the tender things, to do as birds do and to overcome death by dying down, and that a dagger isn't a way to connect with yourself, as her neighbour tells her again, very insistently. As a child, rebirth as a thought of joy was something she'd observed in the snake's head fritillaries stretching up their purple heads every spring after the bitterest cold, although there wasn't even a hint of them all winter. Then after they'd flowered, they died, and Pepsi was worried that they wouldn't make it through the next winter and that there'd be no sign of them in the spring. But needlessly: they always came back, and no one could stop them flowering. Immersed in contemplation, she's absorbed the living essence of the bells' shimmering purple deep within herself. The colours were the flowers' song. This place in the forest of her earliest childhood magically attracted Pepsi before she moved to Hessen, and she always went

there in the same way someone might go to their family and friends. The fritillaries' resurrection drew Pepsi's eyes both to the earth and to the birds and their wings – intermediaries between wind and sun, between expanse and world. Pepsi learned early on from the singing nightingales that the language of birds can live on wallpaper and in human hearts. From her grassy lookout on her grandfather's farm, she spent hours watching them skimming the clouds, always in pairs: winged travellers, timeless engine drivers from the south, a pencil and compass in their airy white hands. In her eyes they were nothing less than celestial travellers, aeronautic envoys, adeptly floating angels that she'd befriend for days on end and that altered in her gaze, took on a new form and promptly flew off to other undefinable shores, always making space for more light. Pepsi lay oblivious in the eternal grass as socialism slowly moved towards its inevitable end in time. In Hessen, grass and socialism are already a distant past and Pepsi feels a little more confined each day. The one-room apartment only has small windows and Pepsi hardly ever sees the sky. Before, though, she was at one with the blue. Day in, day out, the birds flew between her and the colour, and Pepsi felt they were endlessly inhaled by the earth and exhaled again as she opened and closed her eyes. As Pepsi counted the clover for the umpteenth time then looked up at the sky and back to earth, she suddenly felt she was part of that breath. Then she saw double and for a moment her entire body was a giant eye. From that moment on, life set its sights on her from at least two sides and no one, not even her thieving aunt Rosa, whom she'd later asked for her parents' address in Hessen, could drive her from her grassy lookout. So Pepsi wasn't surprised she could smell the alphabet before she learned it as a Young Pioneer, at the school opposite the old stone church. Long before her socialist education had begun, someone had dropped a book in the grassy meadow on the farm, and from then on meadow and book spoke to her as one, quietly and emphatically, as only the truth can. In Hessen, everything's tarmacked; she almost has to hunt down the green in the small town where they all live together now. But she finds what she's looking for on the way to school: a few little tufts of grass are jutting out of the pavement, proving to her that they're immortal. Pepsi greets these green friends enthusiastically; she talks to them as if the tiny traces of green could join forces with her and stand by her, like they did back then, in a life without her parents, when she herself was like them, such a small beginning, and her squinting eyes sent her messages the width of a finger, messages from the sky. Her parents have been working up north for a very long time. Pepsi's father set off to the north as a teenager together with his brothers to become the family breadwinner, first in Hungary, then in Austria, and then he moved on to Hessen. He does nothing but work, day after day for fifteen years, until he meets Pepsi's mother and falls in love with her black hair. Pepsi's Uncle Joseph and Uncle Miki do the same. They work so many hours a day that their hair turns white, and that means if they retired early, death would come and take them in an instant, just as it had taken the others who dared to come to rest in the south. When Pepsi's parents visit, they always tell her that you can't breathe in the north, that you must always drink down your coffee quickly and get back to work. It also means the companies they work for must have clocks that add up your coffee drinking and take away your breath. Pepsi doesn't know what it all means, but the fact that people aren't allowed to drink coffee in peace sounds bad, and she can't believe it. Pepsi's parents had to rush back to those clocks and so, as they told her over and over later on, they had no choice but to give their babies away at the age of ten weeks. Pepsi chews gum and still doesn't like it. But that's why she was separated from her two younger siblings and split in two like a piece of cloth with a huge pair of life-scissors. And her parents raced back north to work as if they were

racing to life's gold, but the work broke their legs, and the race grew harder and harder for them. The north had no love for them and they were alone in it all, because they'd cut themselves out of their own picture with the life-scissors. But first of all they weren't expecting their daughter's letter, and first of all Pepsi had to survive, for a start, and that's what she did with her grandmother, her father's mother, who had a daughter who had died in the cradle, it was said, before Pepsi's father was born, most sadly and distressingly, so she was told early on; the baby suffocated under the covers when her grandmother went to the field for a moment to harvest potatoes for dinner. Pepsi's siblings had, like her, been sent off to relatives in different places just a few weeks after they were born. To start with, Pepsi's grandmother alone took care of Pepsi and apparently never let her out of her sight, keeping her very firmly in her heart's eye so she wouldn't suffocate like the other tiny little baby once had. She'd kept the clothes belonging to her daughter, the one who had died in the cradle, in an old stone shed, and as if she'd simply been waiting for a suitable descendant to be born, she put them all on her granddaughter Pepsi just as she'd once done with her son, and so as a baby Pepsi wasn't allowed to be Pepsi, but instead another child, a child who was no longer alive. But she was alive; she'd been born with a full head of black hair, and she looked like a wide-eyed being from another century. When Pepsi's grandmother, reverently known in the village as 'the Indian woman' because of her sixth sense and ability to see the future, died, Pepsi was only allowed to stay for a while at her grandmother's farm, which was now her grandfather's lonely farm. She then came into the care of a monosyllabic unmarried aunt with no children of her own, who lived in the next hamlet and usually took Pepsi to her grandfather's farm to cook there, because she didn't have a proper kitchen herself, and being lonely was no longer what defined the farm. Pepsi only found out that her parents sent money to the aunt when she had to move again and went to live with her aunt Morgenrot in Herzegovina. It seemed very far away to her. This was where Pepsi spent almost two years, and when her siblings arrived as well, they lived there together for a few months, as if the scissors that had once split them in two had never existed. Pepsi hardly got anything to eat and went to bed hungry every night. Then it was decided that Pepsi should move back to her grandfather's farm, and she wants to know why. So she wouldn't pick up the Herzegovinian dialect, she's told. They say, very bluntly and directly, that among its more Mediterranean neighbours the dialect is said to have been subverted by Muslim Arabic vocabulary in Ottoman Empire times. Pepsi, who had long since absorbed and grown fond of both dialects and considered the Ottoman Empire to be something completely harmless, was supposed to be learning the right language, as they called it. When she heard, she lay down there and then in the green, green grass next to the very brown dog, right where she was standing when the news reached her, and waited for her life in this dialect, scorned by the Dalmatian relatives, to be over, and she vowed never to forget it. Grandfather picked her up on a horse that hadn't been his horse before, but then remained the horse on the farm forever, and the two of them rode for a whole day over hills and mountains, which, when Pepsi turned around, looked like living beings with hearts and kidneys, and a large lung that formed a new landscape in the middle of the landscape. The wind was splendid and powerful and almost snatched her off the horse, but it went on and on and on and didn't stop for a moment that day. Pepsi was hungry as always and was now a hungry traveller estranged from her parents, already longing for her brother and sister on the horse's back and feeling that the trip back to her grandfather's farm was an abandonment of them. She longed so much for their faces and hands that she began to talk to the almond tree about them. Now grown taller, she was lying in the grass, a

schoolgirl eager to learn, in a blue Pioneer's uniform, thinking of the two of them and looking up into the treetop, seeing that nothing comes out of nowhere and yet everything starts with nothing, that the blossom only ever seems to appear all at once, gradually becoming a fruit which can exist on its own or which can be eaten. So it's a beautiful and not a beautiful life, all at the same time. On the one hand. But on the other hand – there is always another hand – there were now these other meadows too, the green, the alphabet, the duplicate world of sky and earth which goes along with her and leads its own life. She lies in the grass, and everything flickers like a merry-go-round of light before her half-closed eyes, and she imagines the circle that connects everything she knows and spins and spins and spins, and one day her brother and sister are standing before her. 'There you are at last!' says Pepsi. The two of them know nothing of Pepsi's other relatives from the land of clouds, plants, birds and the alphabet, have no idea of the conversations she has with snake's head fritillaries, swallows and angels, with the colours and smells of the barrenness in the karst, in summer soaked in the scent of sweet wormwood, which for her is still some nameless herb, and she loves its beautiful yellow flowers dearly. Her sister is standing right in front of her, caressing her with her eyes. But her brother is bolder than she'd like: straight away at their first, long-awaited reunion he asks her a big question, fixing her with a steely gaze: 'Can you prove we're siblings?' No. It feels like a slap in the face to Pepsi; she can't prove a thing; all she can see is that he and she are a 'we'. It hurts her, his coldness, and his not recognising her as a sister is a mystery. At first she wants to cry. But she doesn't. She looks at her feet. At the grass. In parallel to her brother's coldness, she can see that the grass is speaking to her, that the birds are speaking, that the colours are speaking, that everything's speaking and saying something. Then her brother and sister go off again, hand in hand with another relative, another decision from the elders, another change, and sure enough brother and sister move away again; a feeling of exposure comes over Pepsi and she can't stop thinking about their hands, about their beautiful moment of belonging, when their fingers find each other, loyal and silent, just as only the blue of the cornflower can find its way to its stalk. The pair turn their back on her and walk away. They walk away from her, as if they were never coming back to her. And that almost happened. But her letter reunited them.