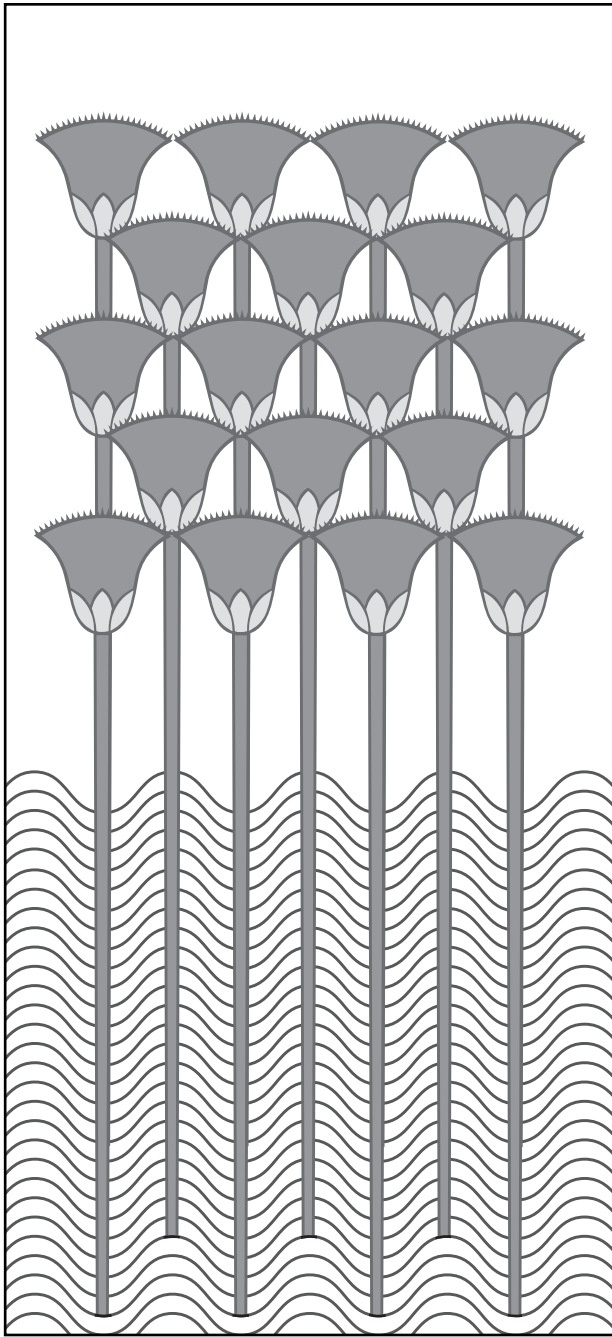


In the Shadow of the Ark



*In the
Shadow
of
the Ark*

ANNE PROVOOST

TRANSLATED BY JOHN NIEUWENHUIZEN



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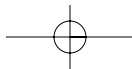
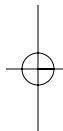
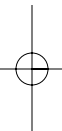
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*The story of Neelata's mother
is based on the story of
Darius I, told by Herodotus
in the third book of his Histories.*



Prologue

We left our land because the marshes where we used to fish were flooding. The tide line was getting ever closer to the slopes where we dried our catches. For years we did our best to move up with it, but in the end it became impossible. The waters threatened our houses, children drowned, harvests and catches rotted. We decided to go away, a long way to the East, to the place where, according to the wandering Rrattika, there lived shipbuilders who were constructing the largest ship of all time and who were looking for workers. We bought a donkey and a tent of animal hide. With great difficulty, we learned to handle the tent. Then we traveled inland, away from the marshes and the duck ponds where we had lived for generations. My father had asked brothers and cousins to provide lights for our departure. One last time he gazed at the many boats he had built; side by side they lay at the edge of the water. As we left, he sang, but if you listened carefully, you could hear that he was uttering curses.

When we looked back from the first hill, we saw, far behind us, the torches fanning out, everyone disappearing into their own houses. I knew what they were saying to one another around their hammocks. That the rising water was not the real reason for our leaving Canaan. That my father had caved in to my mother's will. That we would be sorry and would be back before the change of season.

I had no need of the torches and the polite farewell wishes. I would much rather have left without anyone noticing. Yet I let out a shout from the top of that hill, "It is going to be good out there, much better than here! You will hear about us in songs and stories!" My voice broke, I was so hoarse from the hard work of the last few days. I was straining so hard that the jars hanging off my yoke shook and knocked into one another. I was about to shout something else, but kept my words back because I thought I saw a light appear in a doorway. Was someone coming out with a new plea, the deciding one that would keep us here? I rested one end of the yoke on the ground. One single slope we had climbed, and already I felt the need to sit down.

Nobody came out. In anticipation of daylight, small oil lamps were being lit from the fire of the torches, and the torches were being extinguished. My father said, "Don't bellow like that and look after your things, Re Jana. Don't flaunt your good fortune if you do not want to draw the attention of everything that is intent on thwarting us." I took up my yoke and walked on. There was no good fortune to flaunt, he knew that as well as I. There was only the dull, thoughtless carrying out of my mother's plan.

* * *

A strange caravan we made. At the head walked Alem-the-ragged, a tracker who was not related to us, but who journeyed with us to show the way. He was a Rrattika. Like all Rrattika, he was shabby, lived from hand to mouth, and did not ask how we were when he greeted us. We called him "the ragged" because of his long mustache, his drooping shoulders, and his clothes, which were gray like the mud in which they were washed. He did not smell of oil, like us, but of fat. The fact that my father had engaged him had to do with his talent. From tiny impressions in the ground and almost invisible scraps of fleece caught in thornbushes, he could tell which way the animals we were following had gone. He taught us how to "half-look." As long as you were just looking, all you saw was the little dimples the rain had made in the sand. By half-looking out of the corner of your eye, quickly turning your eyeball away, or by squinting through your eyelashes, you could see a line in the landscape, the track you had lost.

He had his son with him, a young child not half my age, named Put. The child was as dark as I am, so even the Rrattika we met thought he was one of us. He was an intent child. His father wanted him to look at the ground and at the horizon, drawing his attention to the small creases in the landscape that indicated the presence of rocks or water, but the child had no eye for these things. His attention focused on us. He was always the first to notice an ulcer growing under someone's nail or the sun scorching particular parts of our skin. Then he would call out, "Father, I'm tired as a dog," but he himself kept ceaselessly running back and forth, even long after we had sat down, sometimes even after we had fallen asleep.

Behind Alem came the donkey. It was young and very willing during the day, but at night it was so beset by whips and prods in its dreams that it brayed constantly and kept us awake. Its shoulders were covered with blankets to prevent chafing. It pulled the reed sled on which my mother lay. The sled was supported on the donkey's flanks with a bracket, the other end was flat and dragged along the ground. If anyone wanted to follow us, all they had to do was look for the deep furrow left on the hills by the weight of my mother's body. She was wrapped in the same dried grass-filled blankets as the donkey. Not that it was much help: After only a few days, her back was blue from the bumps and the rubbing, and the back of her head practically bald. We stopped more often to change her position than to drink.

Then there was me, Re Jana. I had nearly reached the end of my growing years. The rate at which my arms and legs were getting longer was slowing down. I was nearly as tall as my father and for my yoke I could use the ropes he had made to fit himself. I carried the jars of oils and scents. If I stumbled, they all knocked together and I sounded like a boisterous little band. Close to my body, up against my shoulders, I carried my store of water. To get used to living on land, I drank gourds-full; Alem insisted that would help. Just like dry bread stops you feeling sick on a boat, fluid in your stomach was supposed to protect you against the anxiety and oppressiveness of being on land. I accepted every word out of Alem's mouth as the truth. He was a wanderer, he had seen the world! I had never quite been able to hide my fascination with his people, with their swarms of children, with the way they shook the clothes they had slept in of a morning, like wading birds shaking

their feathers, and with the way they would, from one moment to the next, string all their belongings together and throw them onto their animals' backs, hoist their children onto their hips, and disappear. They could go without food for days on end; even as children they learned to get used to the feeling of gnawing hunger. Privation was a mere inconvenience.

Last came my father. He assumed that a Rratika could only rarely be right, and paid the price for it: He refused to drink unheated drinks, and often the only thing he would take in before nightfall would be the sun-warmed drops from blackberry flowers. And so the land made him sick. He ploughed up the ground with his stick as if it were an oar rather than a support. He was not used to walking far; in all of his life he had rarely covered any distance greater than a few times the length of his fishing boat. He had great strength in his arms, but hardly any in his legs. Yet he never stumbled, his attention to the unevenness of the path never slackened. His balance was important, because he carried the silkworm cage, which had been specially designed for the journey. The small mulberry bush had its roots in water, so the silkworms were constantly threatened with death by drowning. And he carried the brazier, that glowing escape from hunger and cold. But above all, he was fulfilling my mother's dream: He was taking her away from the water. He was making good his promise to go and live in the stony desert, to find other work and another place to live, away from the marshes with their nerve-racking tides.

For weeks on end we walked. We left the landscape we knew. We crossed riverbeds, filled our water bags, and made our way into a dry region full of limestone rocks that showed through the thin

layer of earth. We passed pastures full of sharp grasses, crooked acacia trees, fig trees without fruit, and spent the night under tamarisk trees with ragged bark and leaves soft as down. For every day that passed, my father made a knot in his belt. In the end, the belt became so short it would no longer fit around his thin waist. His face was gray. The emptiness, the boulders, the absence of reeds and mosquitoes made him wretched. Every evening he washed my mother with the water he had saved up. He heated it to the same temperature as her skin. He only allowed himself enough to keep going. All through the journey to the shipbuilders, we begged him to drink. Only after we had passed the cliff from behind which hammer blows could be heard and he could see the gigantic ship we had been told about, did he, without saying a word, grasp the water bag by my shoulder and drink greedily like a small child, until the bag was empty and so limp that it blocked his view of the shipyard.

The wandering Rrattika had not lied. Past the crumbly ridges, in a place where you would expect nothing, or at most a small settlement, a shipyard had been built, which spread like a lake. Apart from a pond, surrounded by scrub, where people came and went constantly, the place was dry as dust and strewn with rocks. The first thing that greeted you was the smell of pitch. Then the sounds. The air was full of the sounds of hammering and planing, and the rattling and grinding of drills reached you right over the top of the ridge. Then, once you had reached the top, you suddenly had a view of something like a city being built. In an area with so few forests, the sight of so many stacks of timber was overwhelming. Wood shavings whirled like mere dust in the wind. In

every conceivable spot stood the tents, stone houses, and barracks of the countless workers who were running around, busy as ants. Most conspicuous was the tent on the slope of the hill where all paths seemed to lead. It was red, as if drenched in ox blood. The tent's opening faced the valley; it looked straight at the heart of the shipyard, at the spot that made our mouths go dry as powder.

Over a wide excavation in the hard ground stood a gigantic scaffold with a boat-shaped structure trapped in a web of vertical and horizontal girders. This was what people in the marshes had been laughing about: the ship in the stony desert. It did not yet reach very high, still showing only its ground plan. Its future scale was visible, but the design revealed the lack of confidence of the builders. Yet the stores of timber and pitch all around revealed its makers' ambition. That was the first thing we, as people looking for work, sensed: that the project down there was being carried along by something powerful, that it had gone far beyond being just a dream. Quite possibly, that was what made my father reach so thirstily for the water bag.

