

TRANSLATED FROM THE CATALAN BY MARA FAYE LETHEM



**when i sing,  
mountains  
dance**

**“The  
entire novel  
emits light, hope,  
and vitality.”**

**—El País  
(Spain)**

**irene solà**

**a novel**

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*A Novel*

**Irene Solà**

Translated from the Catalan by Mara Faye Lethem

Graywolf Press

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*To Oscar*

Og þegar vorvindarnir blása um dalinn; þegar vorsólin skín á hvíta sinuna á árbakkanum; og á vatnið; og á tvo hvíta svani vatnsins; og laðar vornálina frammúr keldum og veitum, – hver skyldi þá trúá því að þessi grösugi friðsæli dalur búi yfir sögu vorrar fyrri ævi; og yfir forynjum hennar? Menn ríða meðfram ánni, þar sem hestar lið inna tíða hafa gert sér götur hlið við hlið á breiðu svæði öld frammaf öld, – og ferskur vorblærinn stendur gegnum dalinn í sólskininu. Á slíkum dögum er sólin sterkari en fortíðin.

*Sjálfstætt fólk*

HALLDÓR LAXNESS

And when the spring breezes blow up the valley; when the spring sun shines on last year's withered grass on the river banks; and on the lake; and on the lake's two white swans; and coaxes the new grass out of the spongy soil in the marshes—who could believe on such a day that this peaceful, grassy valley brooded over the story of our past; and over its spectres? People ride along the river, along the banks where side by side lie many paths, cut one by one, century after century, by the horses of the past—and the fresh spring breeze blows through the valley in the sunshine. On such a day the sun is stronger than the past.

*Independent People*

HALLDÓR LAXNESS

Translated from the Icelandic by J. A. Thompson

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I

## LIGHTNING

We arrived with full bellies. Painfully full. Black bellies, burdened with cold, dark water, lightning bolts, and thunderclaps. We came from the sea and from other mountains, and from unthinkable places, and we'd seen unthinkable things. We scratched at the rock atop the peaks, as if we bore salt, to ensure not even weeds would sprout there. We chose the color of the hills and the fields, and the gleams in rivers, and the glints in upward-glancing eyes. When the wild beasts caught sight of us, they cowered deep in their caves and crimped their necks, lifting their snouts to catch the scent of damp earth approaching. We covered them all like a blanket. The oak and the boxwood and the birch and the fir. Shhhhhhh. And they all went silent, because we were a stern roof and it was up to us to decide who would have the tranquility and joy of a dry soul.

After our arrival all was stillness and pressure, and we forced the thin air down to bedrock, then let loose the first thunderclap. Bang! A reprieve. And the coiled snails shuddered in their secluded homes, godless and without a prayer, knowing that if they didn't drown, they would emerge redeemed to breathe the dampness in. And then we poured water out in colossal drops like coins onto the earth and the grass and the stones, and the mighty thunderclap resounded inside the chest cavity of every beast. And that was when the man said damn and blast. He said it aloud, because when a man is alone there's no need to think in silence. Damn and blast, you had to get yourself stuck in a storm. And we laughed, huh, huh, huh, as we dampened his head, and our water slunk into his collar, and slid down his shoulder and the small of his back. Our droplets were cold and made him cross.

The man came from a house not far off, halfway up to the crest, by a river that must have been cold because it hid beneath the trees. There he'd left behind two cows, a bunch of pigs and hens, a dog and two roving cats, an old man, and a wife and two kids. Domènec was the man's name. And he had a lush midmountain garden patch and some poorly plowed fields beside the river. The patch was tended by the old man—his father, whose back was flat as a board—and Domènec plowed the fields. Domènec had come to reel off his verses over on this side of the mountain. To see what flavor and what sound they had, because when a man is alone there's no need to whisper. That evening when he checked on the herd he found a fistful of early black chanterelles, and he carried the mushrooms wrapped in the belly of his shirt. The baby cried when he left the house, and his wife said "Domènec" as if protesting, as if pleading, and Domènec went out anyway. It's hard to come up with verses and contemplate the virtue hidden inside all things when the kids are crying with the shrillness of a flayed piglet, making your heart race despite your best efforts to keep calm. And he wanted to go out and look at the cows. He had to go out and look at the cows. What did Sió know about cows? Nothing. The calf went maaaaaaaaaaaa, maaaaaaaaaaaa. Desperately. Sió knew nothing about cows. And again he cried out, damn and blast!, because we'd snuck up quickly, hell yes, capricious and stealthy, and we'd trapped him. Damn and blast!, because the calf's tail was stuck in a jumble of wires. The wires had gotten lodged between two trees, and what with all its straining the calf's legs were shredded and gleamed bloody, ragged and dirty. It went maaaaaaaaaaaa, maaaaaaaaaaaa, trapped by its tail between the two trees, and its mother guarded it restlessly. Through the downpour Domènec climbed over to the animal. His legs were good and strong from barreling up the mountain to get some air when the kids were yelling too much, or when they weighed too heavy on him, and the plowing weighed too heavy on him, and the old man's silence, and all the words, one after the other, from his wife, who was called Sió, and who was from Camprodon, and who'd gotten

herself into a fine fix, agreeing to go up there to that mountaintop with a man who slipped away and an old man who never spoke. And of course, sometimes Domènec loved her, loved her fiercely, still. But what a weight, for the everlasting love of God and Satan, how heavy that house could be! Folks should have more time to get to know each other before they marry. More time to live before making children. Sometimes he grabbed her by the waist and spun her around, round and round, like when they were courting, because Sió, oh Sió, lord have mercy, what a pair of legs! He dropped the chanterelles. The calf lowed. Domènec approached the animal, leading with his hands. Slowly, step by step. Saying things in a deep, quieting voice. Ssssh, ssshh, he said. Its mother watched him warily. Domènec's hair was streaming wet. When he got home he'd have Sió heat up some water to wash off the cold and the rain. He looked at the wire that cut into the calf's legs every time it moved. He grabbed its tail firmly, pulled out his knife, and deftly cut the knot. And then we let loose the second bolt. Quick as a snake. Angry. Wide like a spiderweb. Lightning goes where it wants to, like water and landslides and little insects and magpies, transfixed by all things pretty and shiny. The knife was out of Domènec's pocket and it gleamed like a treasure, like a precious stone, like a fistful of coins. The metal blade, polished mirror, reflected us back. Like open arms, luring us closer. Lightning goes where it will, and the second bolt went into Domènec's head. Deep, deep down, down to his heart. And everything he saw inside his eyes was black from the burn. The man collapsed onto the grass, and the meadow pressed its cheek to his, and all our giddy, happy waters moved into him through his shirtsleeves, beneath his belt, into his underwear and socks, searching for still-dry skin. He died. And the cow took off in a frenzy, and the calf followed after.

The four women who'd witnessed it approached him. By degrees. Because they weren't used to taking any interest in how people die. Or in attractive men. Or in ugly men, for that matter. But the scene had been captivating. The light so bright and so dazzling that it sated all need for seeing. The knife had called to

the lightning, the lightning had hit the man's head, bull's-eye, it had parted his hair right down the middle, and the cows had fled in a frenzy, like in some slapstick comedy. Someone should write a song about the man's hair and the lightning comb. Putting pearls in his hair, in the song, white like the gleam off the knife. And include something about his body, and his open lips, and his light eyes like cups filling up with rain. About his face, so lovely on the outside and so burned on the inside. And about the torrential water that fell onto his chest and rushed beneath his back, as if it wanted to carry him off. And about his hands, the song would tell, stumpy and thick and calloused, one open like a flower expecting a bee, the other gripping the knife like tree roots swallowing a rock.

One of the women, the one named Margarida, touched his hand, partly to find out if the man was burning with the lightning bolt inside him, and partly just for the caress. Then the women left him be and gathered up the soaking wet black chanterelles he'd dropped, and abandoned the scene, because they had many other things to do, and many other things to think about. Then, as if their satisfaction were contagious, we stopped raining. Sated. Dispersed. And when it was clear we were done, the birds hopped out onto the branches and sang the song of the survivors, their little stomachs filled with mosquitoes, yet bristling and furious with us. They had little to complain about, as we hadn't even hailed, we'd rained just enough to kill a man and a handful of snails. We'd barely knocked down any nests and hadn't flooded a single field.

We retreated. Dog-tired. And we looked upon our work. Leaves and branches dripped, and we headed off, vacant and slack, for elsewhere.

One time we rained frogs and another time we rained fish. But best of all is hail. Precious stones pummel towns and skulls and tomatoes. Round and frozen. Covering terraced walls and paths with icy treasure. The frogs fell like a plague. The men and women ran, and the frogs, who were teensy-weensy, hid. Alas. The fish fell like a blessing on the men and women's heads, like slaps, and the people laughed and lifted the fish up in the air as if they wanted to

give them back to us, but they didn't want to and we wouldn't have wanted them back anyway. The frogs croaked inside our bellies. The fish stopped moving but didn't die. But whatever. Best of all are the hailstorms.

## THE NAMES OF THE WOMEN

Eulàlia did tell them how the Great He-Goat's anus was so soft, tender as a newborn's from how we coddled and kissed it, and how his shaft was cold as an icicle, and I laughed and laughed and laughed, and all that laughing 'twere what got me hanged. 'Twas that laughter, like a heady venom inside me, like the witch milk from a spurge, 'tis why I remember all the things. Because the laughter was white and contagious like tickles there inside my blood and if you broke my arm, white milk would come out instead of red blood. And the laughter left me emptied. They could've saved themselves the trouble of the tortures and the rooms that stank of piss, could've saved those ropes that stretched out so long, and the wool rags full of ash, and their waiting for me to stop laughing and confess. Confess what? Laughing was a good thing, 'twas a cushion, 'twas like eating a pear, like sticking your feet into a waterfall on a summer's day. I ne'er would've stopped laughing for all the gold in the world, not for all the hurt in the world. The laughter unhitched me from the arms and legs and hands what'd been my loyal companions till then, and from the skin I'd covered and uncovered so many times, and it washed away the pain and grief over things that men can do to you. It done emptied me out like a dunderhead, all that heeheeheehee and hahahaha, and my noggin went clong-clong with the whistling air that entered me and came out my nose and ears. The laughing left my little head clean as a walnut shell, fit to hold all the stories and all the things what we said we done, and all the things they said we done against God and Jesus and all the saints and the Virgin. What Virgin? A god like each of their fathers, evil, evil, evil, and a torturer like them, and



frightened by all the lies they'd repeated so many times they done come to believe them. For there be not a single one left on these mountains, nary a one of those who did point at us, who locked us up, who searched for the devil's mark upon us, who knotted the nooses and tightened the ropes. Because staying or not staying had nary a thing to do with the fires of hell, nor with divine punishment, nor with any faith, nor with any sorts of virtue. No. Being able to get up every morn to gather penny buns and golden chanterelles and to make piss and tell stories 'tis to do with the thunderclaps what befall that tree and that man. 'Tis to do with the infants born whole and the infants what aren't, and the infants born whole but with their innards not in the right places. Has to do with being the bird what the buzzard hunted or the hare the dog hunted, or not. And the Virgin and child and the demon 'twere all fashioned of the selfsame folly.

Of us all, 'tis Joana the eldest. She did come from a house nigh mine, Joana did, and everyone did know she would make cures in a cauldron, and one day she bade me join her if I so desired to learn, and if I desired to go along with her at night. And to have her teach me how to cure fevers, and inflict the evil eye and goiters, and nursling maladies and wounds and cattle diseases. And to find lost and stolen objects and cast glances. Oh, such innocence. For ere our biggest sin against God 'twas getting up every morn after they hanged us, and gathering flowers and eating blackberries.

They all left Joana be and they all did call for her when they went into labor or suffered goiters. Until that time when the hail fell heavy. Joana kept a field of wheat, and when the hail razed all the other fields, nary a hailstone fell on hers. They did say 'twas Joana had made the storm with some of her powders. Sorceress! they did yell. And then the son of her neighbor, who was called Little Joan, a five-year-old lad who was just about the first to call her sorceress, fell ill and his feet did swell purple and black, and he did expire four days later, and everyone did point at Joana, and did exclaim that she had empoisoned his victuals. Get her, get that old

strumpet, that sorceress! And they did. And soon after that, little, little tiny frogs did rain down, and Joana sayeth unto them that if she so desired she could bring on the hail, or bring down a rain of frogs, or make all their livestock die, and then they did take me also and Joana said nothing more ever again. But I was fine, for I learned to laugh.

And then Eulàlia did appear, from Tregurà de Dalt, and she did tell them how she had once gone to Andorra to unearth a dead baby and extract its lungs and liver, to make of it an unguent to kill people and livestock. And then she did tell of how she bound men so they could not lie with other women but only with their wives. Since she made six knots on the strings of their undergarments and then with every knot she did say, I bind you on behalf of God, Saint Peter and Saint Paul, and the whole heavenly court, and on behalf of Beelzebub and Tió and Cuxol, so that you cannot join carnally with any woman who be not your wife. And once, she bound a man and a woman, who were neighbors of hers and who were cruel and threw rocks at her. She did bind them with hairs from their heads, so they couldn't copulate. And when the husband wasn't there, the woman couldn't live without him, and when he was there and wanted to come close to her, her entire body itched such as she thought she might die, and she couldn't stand to be near him. And that way four years passed. Four years! Hahaha heehee. And then one day, their son who took care of their goats brought the animals past Eulàlia's land, and Eulàlia did say oh may bad wolves devour your goats. And right then and there, a wolf pounced into his herd and killed a goat. Then they took Eulàlia, too, and when they had her, she dared tell them that one night the four of us had snatched a nursling from his mother's side, and taken him to a field, and we had played with him as if he were a ball.

Eulàlia always did tell the best stories, still does, better than anyone. Stories that make me laugh, laugh, laugh, until something loosens up inside of me, even deeper inside than the little drops of piss. She tells stories, and we are there in her stories, and verily

what a joy 'tis to be there in them. Inside Eulàlia is a little voice, deep, deep inside, what tells her tales, a little voice, the devil's voice, what told her about the misdeeds, and 'twas spurred on by the pain men inflicted upon her and unleashed like a tongue what no longer knows how to lie still. The little voice came from deep inside her own head, like a fount, springing forth with images and words.

“We entered the forest, I upon a black she-ass, and Dolceta from Can Conill”—“'tis I!” I exclaimed—“upon a fox, and there was no moon and the stars gave nary any light, and a branch leaped out into my path verily like a claw scratching my face, and I said, ‘Jesus!’ and I fell from the she-ass, and Dolceta said, ‘Never say “Jesus” again.’ And I paid her mind. We did go to the Roca de la Mort, we did go there with our armpits smeared with an unguent that scorches the hairs forevermore, and that is why our armpits are bare. When we were there at the Rock, all of us, men and women, did mark a cross upon the ground and we did lower our skirts and we did each place our buttocks there upon the cross, forswearing faith and God. And then we did kiss the devil's anus, one by one. And sometimes he took the form of a calico cat and sometimes of a he-goat, and he said unto us, ‘Art thou with me, my child?’ and we all did answer yes. And then we ate cheese and fruit and honey, and we drank wine, and we all joined hands, men, women, and demons, and we embraced and we kissed and we danced and we fornicated and we sang, all together.”

Margarida cried. She cried and denied everything, she cried and cried at the injustice of it all and sometimes she shrieked, and I told her, come now, Margarida, don't cry, all four of us locked up there in the same dark cell that wasn't even a cell, that was for holding livestock. And we made a good pair, Margarida and I, because I just laughed and laughed, and she just cried and cried, and sometimes the more she cried, the more her face contorted, and the more snot and saliva dripped from her, with her face all red and all swollen and all ugly, the more I laughed, and the more I laughed, the more she cried, and I told her, come now, Margarida,

don't cry, and we made a good pair. Margarida denied every accusation, one after the other, and the only thing she would admit to was having set the table at night. Placing the tablecloth, and bread and wine and water and a mirror, so the evil spirits could gaze upon themselves while eating and drinking, and not kill her babies. But they only need one little thing to hang you anyway.

When Eulàlia told them that Joana was the mastermind who did bring the ghosts and did make the unguents we smeared ourselves with, and was the finest at making elixirs throughout the whole country, and all the other wicked things that witches do, and that she was the mistress of the he-goat of Biterna, and that we were all three her disciples, Joana didn't even blink. Eulàlia didn't say that with evil intent, nor did Joana bear her any bitterness for it, when we were all done for. For she only done said it 'cause she ran at the mouth, just as all the air burst forth from my mouth in haahaas and heehees, and Margarida just cried and cried. All four of us there upon the selfsame soiled hay, covered in rats and fleas.

Joana speaks not, she denies nothing, nor does she laugh, but she is still the leader and still the sagest and always finds the best strawberry tree fruit and the best mushrooms and she's the one who knows the most about abetting births. And she is the first to piss when we find crosses in the mountains, and to grind her netherquarters thereupon. And she is the first to crap upon the tree where they did hang us. She makes nice, firm turds and smiles like a mouse while she is squatting. And she is also the first to shit when we come across little chapels and hidden hermitages.

The tales Eulàlia tells aren't all about witches or about us. Sometimes the little voice tells her things about the mountains and the stones and the pools of water, and the birds sing her songs and the fairies explain fables to her, and I follow her like a little girl, like a lapdog, like a newborn sheep follows its mother, ready to throw myself beneath a horse, if need be, to get back amid her tales. Because she makes me laugh, that Eulàlia does.

“Once upon a time there was a Christian king of Aragon who had three daughters as lovely as the sun,” she tells me. “Just as the