

MÓNICA CRESPO

THE OFFERING

Translated from Spanish by D. P. Snyder

ONE DAY, I FOUND the fingernail clippings. I opened the drawer of the sewing machine where my mother kept her spools of thread and there they were, wrapped in paper. I knew then that she had offered me up. When I emerged from that cramped, dirty room two years later, I looked into my mother's eyes and saw the guilt on her face from listening to my screams on the other side of the door. Once I was outside again, I looked at her with all the hatred I could still summon, given my feelings of profound pain and debasement. I swore I would never forgive her.

Yesterday, I prepared a little package of recently trimmed fingernail clippings taken from my eldest daughter. My hands are trembling now and a terrible, dark shudder runs through me. From this moment on, neither she nor I will ever be safe again. The day has come. I tell her we're going to take a little stroll, just the two of us. We walk down by the river, and the water drowns out all the other sounds, the high grasses brush against our legs, and I see how they writhe. The green strands hiss and cling to her ankles, slithering up over her knees and thighs and, when we get there, she looks at me uncomprehendingly. The door opens, and I tell her to go in. She hesitates, and that's when I see she understands what's happening. I shove her hard inside.

THEY COME TO *my home. I open the door, and a young girl comes in. I'm nervous and on guard. I heard them earlier down by the river. I caught their scent, too. I remember one of them. The new one smells different but somehow similar to the first one. She stumbles into my house. It's really just a windowless room with a dirt floor. I look out at the world through a long, narrow crack in the adobe wall. I don't know how long I've been here. I've long forgotten. Nor do I know why I'm here. I guess I do what I must because they keep coming back, and I keep doing it over and over again. It's the only thing I know how to do. I need them, and I guess they need me, too. I'm tired. I'd like to leave this place, but I'm afraid.*

I STAND THERE in front of the closed door. Now I'm the one on the outside, and I know what's going on in there. I wait in anguish. I want

the door to open and my daughter to reappear. Some of them never come back. I wait for her to come out and hate and insult me, just as I did my own mother all those many years ago. I hope she survives.

No one, not one single woman, knows when the offering began, but all of us keep repeating it, walking along the same green, grassy path by the water to hand over our daughters. All of us would agree to turn over our daughters yet to be born to avoid being devoured ourselves. If I had known who my daughter was going to turn out to be, if I had known her name back then, her skin, her face, well, I would have let myself be eaten right then and there. I would have begged for it.

I don't know how far back the covenant goes, or who was the first to agree to it, but I'm sure it was a man. Maybe it was to salvage a scant harvest, to atone for a crime, or to save his own skin. The men of the valley are oblivious. I don't know if they know about it, knew about it and have forgotten, or are just feigning ignorance. We women keep our mouths shut out of shame and guilt. My younger daughter bites her nails down to the quick. She guesses she will be next. I have to save her.

MY MOTHER HOLDS me by the hand. We are at his door again. I'm terrified, and she's as rigid as a tree trunk. Quiet, she says, when my mouth opens, groping for words. She unfastens her bag, and a strange flower appears. A white flower with large open petals and a reddish-purple center like a vulva, dark purplish-red and carnivorous, wide-open as a goblet. Then she opens a little paper package and drops my sister's fingernail clippings in it. She leaves it on the bare dirt in front of the doorway. *Come on, let's get out of here*, she says urgently, grabbing my hand. My legs tremble amid the leaves of grass, which know who I am now, and my throat, swaddled in the flesh of my neck, closes in and chokes me. We go home in silence, retracing our footsteps. Both of us are afraid.

The next day after breakfast, my sister vomited a long, heavy braid of grass, black as tar. It streamed out of her mouth like sickness. My mother buried it behind the house, like the silent abortion of an unwanted child. Then my mother came back inside and said to us: *Tomorrow, I will hand it over to him.*

HE'S ALWAYS HARASSING us because he knows we can't pay what we owe. He walks into the house and struts around as if the place belonged to him. He orders my daughters to serve him caña and some-

times forces me to have sex. If I don't let him, he sits on the bench in the courtyard and rolls a cigarette, twisting evil between his fingers and compressing until he has tamed the tobacco inside the paper. Then he sticks out his long, slimy tongue, using it to seal paper, tobacco, and time inside, once and for all, and I can feel that tongue sticking to my back and running all over me like one long shiver of revulsion.

Today he looks at me and taps the end of the cigarette a few times on the bench. He runs his eyes over my body from head to toe and lights it. Now he slaps his hand on the wooden bench: *next to me*, says the hand. I sit down, and he presses his body up against mine.

"The time has come," he says. "You know what I want. The truth is that all this belongs to me, and all I have to do is come and take what's mine. Hasn't it always been so? Your husband understood this, and he was always miserable." And his hand plunges inside my blouse and tries to grab my breast. I stand up.

"I have something for you," I say. "Tonight, I'll take you someplace you've never been before. We'll walk along the river, and if you can be a little patient now, I'm sure you'll be happy you did." He looks at me, flashing a lopsided smile, and takes a long drag on his cigarette. He rolls a few words around in his mouth, and then agrees. "My lovers moan even louder down by the river," he says, running his reptilian tongue across ancient lips.

"I'll wait for you tonight under the purple silk-floss tree up in the high meadow," I say. And I pull away from him with the desperate force of a fly breaking free of a spiderweb.

That night, I waited for him beneath the purple silk-floss tree. From its bulging, thorn-covered trunk sprang a cascade of white flowers and roses that clung to its branches, sheltering me with their smell of putrefaction and life boiling up from within. We walked along the river and it greeted us with swollen waters, and his voice echoed across them when he spoke, and the grass began to hiss and slither up the pants of the man I was leading along. And then I began the offering. And then, it chose him. When we got there, I opened the door and shoved him inside.

"I'll be back soon," I said as I slammed the door shut behind him. I hung around to listen. I listened with all my might, my heart pounding, but there wasn't a single sound. After I don't know how long, he emerged, trembling and pale. He seemed like a man who was at once much older and much more like a child.

“Is it done?” I asked him.

He looked at me and burst into tears. And for the first time, I felt free. The offering had given us a witness.

“You will have to bring your son,” I said.

He looked at me blankly. We returned together and, at last, parted. The river bank was quiet and still.

WHEN HE *walked in, I knew my time had come. It had happened at last. I would be free and escape my centuries of seclusion, so I did what I had to do for the last time, aware that it was the last time. But this time, I gave myself to him. When I emerged on the other side, I felt as frightened as a newborn child. I looked behind me, and I saw my spent body there on the dirt floor. I longed for it because it was familiar and my very own, but I felt the little human heart that was now beating inside me and the clumsiness of the man-body in which I found myself. I wept from fear and pain. But then, that woman I knew said to me, now you will have to hand over your son. I didn't answer her. Because now it was done, and I only hoped that the man-body wouldn't last for too long. I walked along the river, and everything went quiet as I passed. There would be no more need for the river water's song or the grasses telling me about the path. And I breathed in the warm, all-enveloping air, which seemed to come from everywhere.*

THERE ARE TIMES when I walk along the river and, without intending to go there, my feet take me back to the old house. Dark shadows echo within, but when I get close and press my head against the walls, I can't hear anything but the silence of the conch shell inside my ear's labyrinth, the emptiness of my breath stirring beneath the skin. Then I know that there's nothing there but the shadows inside of me and the memory of a long lost day.

When he died, everything went quiet. No one knew when it happened, only that the river stopped flowing and the animals became silent. You couldn't hear the frogs, the cicadas, or the constant buzzing of the dragonflies in the rushes, and the birds stopped flying. Time was the verdant silence of stagnant water that hung heavy on everyone. The oxen stopped lumbering to their feet and let themselves die in their straw beds, and the abandoned fields slowly became choked with weeds.

Down by the river, a thicket of grasses was devouring the house. They began to eat away at the walls, and little by little, they penetrated it with their thick bullrush ribs. The house slowly dissolved like a lump

of sand, and one day, it was gone. Then, the whole place melted away, and nothing ever grew there again. Only fine sand remained, like the powder from a butterfly's wing, covering everything. The purple silk-floss tree blossomed into an eternal cottony crown, its thorns fell off, and the trunk became smooth and new again.

I GAZE AT my daughter and the curls on her tender neck that will never be tamed. I watch as she runs through the tall grass by the river with a star-tipped wand in her hand and wings of wire and tulle on her back.

"Come, my darling," I say. "We're late getting home."

I see my daughter jump up and down, and the movement of her wings reminds me of other wings from many years ago. The butterfly came in through the kitchen window and fell into the metal box where we kept the paraffin, empty at that moment. With the metallic clang of a saucer, my grandmother covered it. I went to bed, holding the secret inside. The next day, I went to the kitchen very early while everyone else was still asleep and the light through the curtains was illuminating everything. I took the saucer off the box where I expected to find the butterfly and be able to watch it take off, free, when I lifted the lid. But instead, I found a water-clear pool of oil in which the butterfly was floating, its wings in tatters. Next to the stove on the white marble countertop, I saw a picture of a young man riding a horse that I had never seen before, and next to that, a candle burned down to almost nothing.

At that moment, looking at the butterfly soaked in paraffin, I understood my mother's sorrow, the oily density of the grief that had weighed her down since my father's disappearance. And just then, she got out of bed and appeared barefoot in the kitchen, her gray braid undone and hanging over her shoulder. I understood her pain, sorrow, and guilt. That's how we secret mothers are.

That day, for the first time in many years, I returned to that place, walked into our house, and looked for the book that my mother had hidden in a hole beneath the floor of her bedroom. I pried up two floorboards that wobbled beneath the pressure of my fingers. I remember having seen the book in my grandmother's hands and not knowing what it was. I removed it from its hiding place: it was wrapped in old cloth, and I felt how strangely heavy it was. It was the size of a small Bible, touched by my grandmother's hands, by my mother's, and by other hands that were no longer with us. The river began to rise,

the wind was stirring the foliage, and my grandmother was whispering words there by the fire in the wood stove. She swayed back and forth, her lips in constant motion, and my mother kept us from disturbing her with our games. Night fell, and we went to bed. My father carried us up to our room in his arms, and my sister and I clambered to get to the highest spot on his shoulders. My mother was opening the metal door of the stove, stoking the fire with a long iron, and adding more wood. Then she closed it, as solemnly as if she were ending an era. She barely touched my grandmother, just a light stroke on her wrinkled cheek with the back of her hand. The next day, we found her there, asleep, the book open on her knees. My mother gently woke her and led her to her room. She slept all day long and reappeared the next day at dinnertime, ravenously hungry.

I sat on my mother's bed and carefully turned the pages of the book. A folded slip of paper dropped out from between its leaves and settled on one of my shoelaces. It was folded in equal parts. I opened it up and saw the dark lines of the creases tracing a perfect grid of eight squares. In each one was a single word. I read them out loud without understanding what they meant, a litany of strange utterances ringing out in my voice. Then, just as the instructions on the other side of the paper indicated, I lit some incense and filled the house with a white veil of smoke, first from north to south and then in alignment with the sun's trajectory. I waited for nightfall. Then, in the semi-darkness, I opened the metal door of the stove and placed the paper and the book inside, along with some old-growth wood, and waited there until they burst into flame. That day was my family's last offering. Others will have to find their own door.

Then, I packed my bags, and we returned to the city. Home, no looking back.