

Sample Translation

Runaway

(Wegloop)

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Translated by Laura Watkinson

The year 1532

He was only eleven years old, but still they had chosen him. Because he could endure standing up straight in the snow with bare feet for longer than the others. And he pulled his hands out of the fire later than the others. And there was no swaying to be seen when he stood, his toes poking over the edge, above the chasm of Titipaka, with deep below the river foaming wildly around the sharply pointing rocks. But above all he was chosen for his speed. Faster than all of the other eleven-year-olds, faster than most of the twelve-year-olds, sometimes even outrunning some of the thirteen-year-olds as he made his way towards the finish line. ‘He did a good one-in-four,’ said some people, and they claimed that he was ‘faster downhill than the condor in a swooping dive’. As fast as a bird, he was, and so they called him ‘Birdspeed’.

But now he was scared. Now they had to drag him along the cold stone corridors of the palace, three of them fighting against his resistance. He was scared because they weren’t taking him to the snow, not to the fire, not to the chasm, but to the Most Exalted Amauta. ‘And his eyes look right through your soul and pin you to the wall, so that you’re stuck there forever,’ his friends had told him. ‘Like a butterfly.’

He understood that this was worse than death, and that was what was going to happen now. They dragged him through an archway and into a large room, where different lights, different smells, different echoes held sway. He was forced to his knees and a voice said: ‘Is that all? Make him stand.’

They pulled him up and he stood with his knees bent, trembling, with no will of his own – this chasm was too deep. He felt the gaze judging him and he waited for his soul to be pinned to the wall.

‘Is this the fast boy?’ The voice alone impaled his soul.

‘He can run one-in-four, Highness.’

‘Hmm...’

‘Can he stay the course?’

‘Round Cuzco in one go.’

‘Hmm...’

‘Boy,’ came that piercing voice now, ‘stop that trembling and look at me.’ He felt a hand on his shoulder: the Most Exalted Amauta was so close that he could touch him. ‘Open your eyes, boy!’

He only plucked up enough courage to open his eyes by simultaneously sinking back to his knees.

‘Stand up!’

He didn’t dare to.

‘Boy!’ insisted the voice, ‘we need your speed, your strength, your courage and your perseverance. Stand up and listen.’

He couldn’t believe what was being said, but the tone of it forced him to his feet, and suddenly, standing up straight before the Most Exalted One, and looking at him for a moment, he felt the piercing in his soul, but instead of paralysis, he felt such a strength as he’d never known before in the eleven years of his life.

‘Listen well, boy. You have to deliver a message, a message of vital importance, to Machu Picchu.’

On hearing that name, the lad began to tremble again. Machu Picchu, was that where he had to go? To the Sacred City in the Clouds? And would he be able to remember the message? Runners had to have good memories and pass on a verbal message to the next Runner, who would then pass it on to the next. That’s how it worked, he knew, like a relay, and the memory training was really tough.

‘Don’t be so scared, boy! You don’t have to remember anything. The message you have to deliver is in here.’ The Most Exalted Amauta showed him a case.

‘Take care, because this comes straight from Cajamarca, where our Inca Atahualpa resides.’ Now the boy began to tremble even more, even his teeth chattering – a message from Atahualpa, the Son of the Sun God, would scorch him when he touched it, he was sure, but the Most Exalted Amauta brought him back into line and resolutely hung the case on his back, with a strap around his shoulder, saying: ‘This state secret was brought here from Cajamarca within four days, by our longest chain of Runners, and you have been chosen for the final

stage: upwards to the Sacred City in the Clouds, to deliver it into the hands of the Amauta of that place. Go, and do your duty.’

A Runner, thought the boy. I’m a Runner now. Only eleven years old, and a Runner! He forgot to bow, forgot to say ‘I shall do my best’ and ‘Thank you’, forgot everything except that he had to run, hour upon hour along the royal road and then branch off along the rarely used path, up the three-in-one incline, down the one-in-three incline, and at the end just up, up, up, to the Highest Holy of Holies. Rhythm, rhythm, rhythm, breathe-pant-breathe, and onwards, always onwards – your heart can do more than your head thinks.

He didn’t wonder about what was in the case, what sort of message. He understood that it was of vital importance – and that was all that counted as far as he was concerned.

The brand-new Runner did know one thing for sure: the message that he had to deliver had to do with the arrival on earth of the Pale Gods.

Their arrival had created turmoil. Gods had descended from the heavens! In the north! They’d come right out of the sky, sitting on the back of llamas. But these were no llamas – they were divine four-footed beasts, upon which they were now being carried further through the land. And they were coming closer. They were Pale Gods, clad in a grey metal that was not gold!

What on earth?! The stories were becoming increasingly wild and unbelievable. But they were passed on with such persistence that some of it had to be true. Which is why Atahualpa, the Son of the Sun God and Inca of the Incas, had journeyed to the north with his retinue, taken up residence at his palace in Cajamarca, and had sent out Apu, his master spy.

It turned out to be true: over a hundred heavenly beings, riding on the backs of heavenly beasts, had appeared on earth in the north, and were approaching. The beasts were four-footed creatures without wings; the gods were partially clothed in metal that was not gold and they spoke an incomprehensible language.

All of this was related by Apu the spy. But it was not clear what the gods had come here to do.

‘We must receive them with the greatest respect,’ ordered Atahualpa.

But the Rag Man, a seer from the south, presented himself, loudly demanding access to the highest in the land, crying ‘Danger! Danger!’ and banging on the walls and the gate of the palace.

‘Let him enter,’ ordered Atahualpa.

The man appeared in his shabby garb and dirty sandals, neither bowing nor kneeling, and he began, as though he were reading something that was written in the air, prophesying in a singing tone: ‘They are gods of iron, beast-riders! Fire-shooters from over the sea, a different sea, far, far to the east, mighty masters of the sea, merciless deceivers, vengeful and grasping. They are approaching in their hundreds, in their thousands, in their millions. They will strike us down, steal our gold, take our land. They will become a multitude, the Pale Gods, expanding over centuries, sailing over land, over sea and through the skies, violating the ancient power of Pachacama until they... until they...’ With a hideous scream, the man fell to the ground in his filthy rags, arching his back and then stretching like a caterpillar in a fire, his hands clasped over his eyes as though he had seen into hell.

Atahualpa had him removed.

‘Majesty,’ Apu began cautiously, ‘they are deceitful, these seers, but...’

‘But?’

‘But the man said one thing that makes me wonder...’

‘One thing?’

‘He said something about fire-shooters.’

‘And that means?’

‘A stick that fire comes out of with a bang, and anyone that they point this stick at drops down dead, Majesty.’

‘Have you seen it happen?’

‘With my own two eyes, Majesty. But the Rag Man, how can he know about it?’

‘Hmmm...’

‘Only... if what he has seen is true, what good are we against gods?’

‘Hmmm...’

Atahualpa was quiet for a long time, and then he said: ‘We can call on our own gods to help.’ And he suddenly cried in a thunderous voice: ‘Thaouka!’

‘Ma-majesty...!’

‘Thaouka the Terrible, greater than the condor, shall destroy the Pale Gods!’

There was only one statue of the god Thaouka: a huge bird, like a hawk, with a wingspan of four-and-a-half metres, made of solid gold and studded with wickedly sparkling jewels. The statue came from ancient times, long before the Incas, and was tainted with supernatural powers of such aggression that they had not dared destroy it and had stowed it away in a secret place in the dark near to the Sacred City in the Clouds. For times of need.

‘Let it be brought out!’ ordered Atahualpa. ‘So that it might destroy the Pale Gods.’

This command was recorded with a quipu, the only sort of writing that the Incas knew: a cord from which a row of strings hung, of different lengths and colours and with knots in, all combining to form a text.

It was just such a quipu that the fearless eleven-year-old snow-fire-chasm champion carried in the case on his back, on the last stage of the journey to the Sacred City in the Clouds.

But a few days after this command had been sent out, the master spy ran in panting with the exclamation: ‘Majesty! Majesty! Majesty! They are not gods!’

Atahualpa did not approve of breaches of etiquette. The spy was told to go and get his breath back outside first and then to enter again. He did so.

‘With due deference, Majesty. The Pale Gods are not gods.’

‘They are not?’

‘Indeed, Majesty. They are not.’ The master spy complied strictly with the etiquette.

‘How so?’

‘They die.’

‘They die??’

‘Yes, Majesty, I have seen them die, the Pale Gods!’

‘All of them?’

‘Some of them, Majesty. Two or three became ill and died. As we do ourselves.’

‘Dead????!’ Atahualpa directed his gaze straight at the stone floor and said nothing. For a very long time. This news was too overwhelming for words. Gods do not die, do not become ill, so if the Pale Gods died, then they could not be gods, but what were they then? Humans like themselves? But what about their divine llamas then? Upon which they flew down? As many people had seen. What about the way they came out of the skies and descended in the north on the earth? And then had come riding from there upon the backs of their divine four-footed beasts, until they were close to Cajamarca, and requested admittance via an interpreter who understood the language of the Pale Gods? Not gods?? But then his command had been sent out for nothing, then the terrible statue of Thaouka did not have to be brought out, then it would be better to keep it hidden. Could they still catch up with the command? Impossible. What now?

For days and days Atahualpa sat contemplating the issue and listening to what his spy and the interpreter could tell him about these non-gods, and slowly it dawned on him that the Pale Gods were humans, but different from them, with pale faces and eyes full of slyness. ‘Sly sly sly...’ he muttered under his breath, whole nights long. And now they were no longer gods, those pale men on their strange four-footed beasts (which did not have any wings on their flanks at all and had only come flying out of the skies in the imagination of the frightened Incas), now they were no longer gods, they had changed in Atahualpa’s eyes into

a handful of robbers, hungry for their wealth and with the glitter of the Inca gold
already in their eyes.

A mere handful...

The years 1997–1998

‘Tell me! Tell me! Tell me!’ His mother was giving him a shaking. ‘Tell me! Are you being bullied at school?’

He shook his head. ‘Nooo!’

‘Are you scared of your father?’

‘Nooo!’ Dad wasn’t a bad guy.

‘You’re not scared of me, are you?’ she asked.

As though he’d ever had any reason to be!

‘But why do you do it then?’

She was shaking him so hard, her hand squeezing his arm, that she made him sob.

‘I-I-I... don’t know!’

‘You don’t know?’ She was almost screaming at him now. ‘You don’t know why you run away?’

It suddenly sounded ridiculous, and that’s exactly what it was, he could hear that much himself and that made him cry even more.

‘Rea... really, Mum. I rea... really don’t...’

She let him go. She sat down and pulled him close. ‘Is there someone then...’ she started in a completely different tone, ‘is there someone... who’s tempting you to go with them? Who’s promising you something, a man who...’

‘No, Mum!’ That definitely wasn’t it.

‘You can tell me the truth,’ she continued. ‘I won’t be angry. I promise.’

‘No, Mum, no! I... I just suddenly have to get away. I...’ The tears were beginning to trickle down again.

‘Just like that?’ she asked. ‘Just away? Not heading for somewhere?’

He nodded fiercely.

‘But what were you doing at that sawmill then?’ He shrugged.

‘Did you want to take a look around?’

He shrugged again. A slight nod.

‘To see how they make planks? With those machines? But it’s dangerous there. With the big saws and—’

‘I didn’t even go inside,’ he said.

‘So why did you go there then? And what were you after that time at the level crossing when the police found you? And why had you gone to Kanaalstraat, when your dad found you that time? And that time you were in that garden and that woman phoned me up, what was her name again?... Never mind. What were you doing there? Is it any wonder they call you Runaway, son?’

He was almost suffocating under her questioning. It was as though she was turning him inside out so that he could see his own stupidity. And that idea made him cry so much that he just yelled: ‘I don’t know! I don’t do it on purpose! I... I just go!’

She let him finish crying, his whole body shaking, his cheeks soaking wet, his nose streaming. He wiped his nose on the back of his hand; he was just a great big mess of misery. She gave him a handkerchief.

‘I’ll never do it again,’ he said with a heartrending sob.

And so Runaway never did it again. Never ever again. He promised himself, because he didn’t want to do it. He really didn’t. He didn’t want to make his mum sad, his dad angry and himself sorry. Being sorry was something that he never thought about when he gave in to his urge to run away, but which he only felt afterwards. So, never again. NEVER.

NEVER lasted a long time, as long as a whole week. But one morning Runaway heard the peewits in the meadow along the way (he knew that it was ‘peewit’ with an ‘e’ and only one ‘t’) and the next moment he was running through the long grass. Because, he thought, there’s bound to be an egg for me to find, and then – but the time for peewits’ eggs was long over, and it wasn’t allowed either, but the smell of the tender grass, the warmth of the early sun, the immense space of the blue sky gave him wings. He had to get up there, he had to,

he had to. Waving his arms, he ran on, whooping and yelling with his desire to rise up into the sky, up and away, far, far away through the blue.

‘But where to, Runaway? Where to?’ his father asked with well-meaning concern. He wasn’t angry, he was serious, like a doctor when you’ve really got something wrong with you. And he was also being serious about calling him Runaway instead of Nick. ‘You can’t expect us to believe you don’t know, can you, lad?’

Runaway didn’t dare look at his father and he stammered: ‘The... the blue sky...’ and his face went red.

But his dad didn’t laugh. ‘Did you want to fly?’

Runaway’s face went even more red. He nodded.

‘Do you want to fly planes when you’re older then?’ asked his dad. ‘Be a pilot? When you grow up?’

Runaway had never thought about it. ‘Maybe that’s what it is,’ said his dad. ‘That you keep wanting to take off. Hold your horses, lad, until you’ve left school and then you can become a pilot.’

But that wasn’t it. Not at all. And it just kept getting worse – they found Runaway in Ankeveen, in the middle of Hilversum, on the heath by Blaricum and on the train to Zwolle. Then it was over. His dad, his mum, his teacher, his headmaster, his doctor, the police, and the friendly fireman all agreed: ‘Something has to be done.’

The psychiatrist.

Oh, what a nice man he was. And he wore a jumper just like a normal person. But what had Runaway imagined he’d be wearing? A wizard’s cape?

‘So, you keep running away, do you?’ asked the psychiatrist.

Was that a question he was supposed to answer? He looked at the man, suspicious of his chumminess.

‘Sometimes,’ he said.

The man laughed, still all friendly, and prompted him: ‘So... sometimes...?’

Then it went quiet. Runaway kept his mouth firmly closed.

‘I can see,’ the psychiatrist finally began, ‘I can see that you’re a clever boy. Well, certainly not a stupid one in any case. So I’m going to ask you a tricky question. Here it comes: When you run away, are you running away from something, or are you running towards something?’