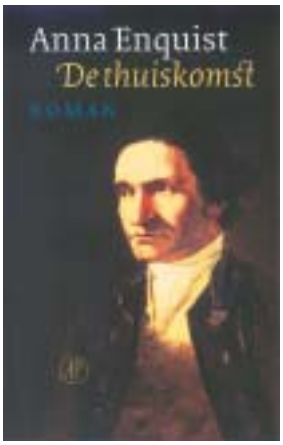
Consolation is for the undamaged

Anna Enquist



The Homecoming

With *The Homecoming*, a historical novel, Anna Enquist has changed course. Elizabeth Batts, the main character, is married to James Cook, the eighteenth-century explorer who during his voyages charted large parts of the world. During his third venture to Hawaii, he was murdered by the local populace for circumstances that have never been explained.

The novel opens with Elizabeth waiting for James' return after his second voyage, one which has lasted several years. Three of their five children have died in his absence; the accidental death of their little daughter Elizabeth being an especially heavy blow. Once Cook is back, the couple seems to have drifted apart. James may be a hero to the world at large, but as husband and father he is a failure. He has seen none of his children grow up, and the burden of their deaths falls entirely on Elizabeth, all of which makes her the true hero of the marriage. This is also evident in the editing of his travel journals with Elizabeth correcting James' grammatical mistakes and his style and resisting the editorial bowdlerization which James has accepted without complaint. On shore James is not the superior commander he is at sea; he is often ill, is terrible at carrying out his tasks as an advisor, and feels ill at ease in society.

No wonder that Cook accepts a new commission to find a northern passage to the east. He is present for the birth of his sixth child, but by the time of its death as well as that of his two remaining sons, he sailed away and Elizabeth has to cope with the grief and mourning by herself. Even though she is strong, she finds it hard – not helped by being continually haunted by the death of her young daughter. As the violin teacher of her musical son, Nathaniel tells her: 'Consolation is for those who've suffered no more than a minor blow. I don't think you can bear consolation.'

Now, in addition to the loss of her six children, Elizabeth has James' death to mourn too. The facts of the case are concealed by the authorities in order not to detract from his heroism, and for the rest of her life Elizabeth hears the 'true' facts about his death bit by bit – a fictional dénouement that gives the futile waiting for his homecoming extra poignancy. *The Homecoming* is a story about loss and sorrow and expectations not realized, but it is also a insightful and splendidly written portrait in which Enquist effortlessly bridges the distance in time.

photo Bert Nienhuis

Anna Enquist (b. 1945) started her literary career as a poet with *Soldatenliederen* ('Soldiers' Songs', 1991) which was awarded the C. Buddingh' prize for best poetry debut. For her second collection *Jachtscènes* ('Hunting Scenes', 1992) she received the Lucy B. and C.W. van der Hoogt prize. In 1994 Enquist published her first novel, *Het meesterstuk* (The Masterpiece) which has sold 250,000 copies. Her second novel, *Het geheim* (The Secret) was an even greater success and received the Trouw prize awarded by the public. Since then the work of Enquist has appeared in a great number of countries, Germany, England, France, and Portugal among them.

Her best, most comprehensive and most touching novel. NRC HANDELSBLAD

A surprising and touching novel about the loss of children, about a ruined union between a man and a woman, and, above all, about the inadequacies of facts in helping to understand people. HAARLEMS DAGBLAD

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An interview with Anna Enquist

Freed from history

by Menno Schenke
(28 May 2005, Algemeen Dagblad)

translated by J.K. Ringold

The Dutch really like to read about the past. Just ask Hella Haasse, Nelleke Noordervliet, Thomas Rosenboom, Margriet de Moor, and Tessa de Loo. With her new novel, *De thuiskomst* ('The Homecoming', about the life of the British explorer James Cook (1728-1779) and his wife Elizabeth Batts, Anna Enquist joins this list of authors who like to come up with historical subjects.

When Anna Enquist (b. 1945, Amsterdam) started writing prose – we've known her as a poet since 1991 – she had a list of three themes she wanted to write about: the story of Don Juan (or Don Giovanni, Mozart's beautiful opera), piano technique, and James Cook.

In the novels *Het meesterstuk* (The Masterpiece, 1994) and *Het geheim* (The Secret, 1997) the first two themes were given a fictional setting. James Cook was still waiting his turn … But a Dutch author who immerses herself in the life of a British hero of more than two centuries ago? That's risky to say the least. 'I ran into Cook in 1992,' Anna Enquist explains. 'I'd gone hiking with a friend in England, in the Cleveland region. One day we had a short hike and ended up in Whitby, a small town on the North Sea where there is a museum devoted to James Cook. We went to that museum on that idle afternoon, and I was sold.

'For days we hiked through the barren region where Cook's father had been a farm worker. Then you reach the coast and you think: of course, the only way out of here is by sea! I understood exactly how James Cook must have felt. I thought…'

Even though it was a great idea to write about James Cook, the explorer who mapped among other things the coast of New Zealand, Anna Enquist quickly understood that a historical novel requires a different approach from an 'ordinary' novel. She had to do research about Cook's era, about him, and about his wife's life. 'That wasn't as easy as you'd think. There is a famous biography, *The Life of*

Captain James Cook by John Beaglehole, but it's no longer available. I bicycled by all the second-hand bookstores in Amsterdam, but no one had it, and you could not yet search on the internet at the time. They do have the book in the *Scheepvaartmuseum* (Maritime Museum), and I spent several afternoons there reading. But I had to have it myself, and I placed an ad in *Vrij Nederland* to see if someone had a copy of that biography. An old sailor who was going to move to a home for the aged called me. He sent me his copy. I've seldom been so happy with a book.'

In James Cook she discovered some of the ideals from her own upbringing – for example, the idea that everyone should be able to go to school. Did he mean socialism? 'A sense of justice,' says Anna Enquist. 'British society was class based; all the high-ranking sea captains came from illustrious, if not noble families. Cook made it that far because he could think so clearly. That's justice. In my book it also contributes to his downfall, but anyway … For me, the fact that Cook was not religious was also risky for that era. He really believed in empiricism: observe, think. And when there are things that you don't understand you shouldn't say: that's the hand of God.'

For several years Anna Enquist continued to read about Cook, but something nagged at her: 'I often thought that as a Dutch person you shouldn't try to write about British history because it will be too ambitious a project. I published all sorts of other things during these years. But if you can't let go of an idea, then you should do something with it, shouldn't you? I realized immediately that I wouldn't be able to manage it and a job at the same time. Therefore I resigned from my position as psychotherapist, but then, early in 2001 I was commissioned to write the gift book for the National Book Week of 2002. Then, in the summer of 2001 my daughter Margit died, and James Cook was shelved. Even before my daughter's accidental death I was ready to start work on it: it had to be James Cook, I didn't even look for a Dutch parallel. I found his scientific concerns interesting because I was brought up that way and have used it in my work: don't judge right away, don't immediately interpret things that you find scary.'

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When she started writing, a technical problem that had been hanging over her presented itself: how do you handle a historical novel about a person about whom so much is already known? ‘If I did it from Cook’s point of view,’ acknowledges Anna Enquist, ‘there would be too much to take into account. That wouldn’t really work. A friend said: ‘Do it from the point of view of Cook’s wife Elizabeth.’ That was a very good suggestion because we know nothing about her except that she was a plucky lady who took good care of herself financially. I could let her hate sailing and therefore I wouldn’t need to describe all sorts of pulleys and ropes. A kind of laziness, but it gave me more freedom.’

For a moment Anna Enquist departs from the thread of her story because there was a personal problem that came up: ‘Before my daughter’s death I could remember everything, after it my memory was totally gone. When, in the summer of 2003, I decided to start work on the book and realized that it was useless to start reading all the books about Cook once again, I was faced with the fact that I knew nothing, even though I knew everything.’

‘I bought long strips of paper on which I made timelines: what happened in which month, who met with whom? For my work I have a large table on which these strips of paper lay for a year and a half.’

‘At the outset my ability to concentrate did not improve. After the first two parts I interrupted my work last year during the summer vacation. It wasn’t until after that vacation that I had a real desire to return home: they were calling me, I had to continue with these characters, I couldn’t just leave them.’

‘For my earlier novels I made drawings and outlines beforehand, but now I was unable to do that. *The Homecoming* came into being as it were under my hands. I kept a writing diary in which I noted down what I did and in which flashback I was. Every day, seven days a week, I wrote a small part, two pages, by hand.’

Back to the historical novel as genre - it starts unanticipated processes in the author’s head. Such as the following: Anna Enquist talks about her characters as if she has known them personally. ‘Elizabeth Batt’s father died when she was

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two, and then a stepfather came into the picture,' says Enquist to illustrate her point, once again immersing herself completely without any trouble. 'Elizabeth felt like someone who was abandoned as a child. When James Cook leaves for his third voyage, even though he had promised his wife that he would stay on shore, she is profoundly affected. I didn't describe all that, but it plays a role when you look at her character. I think that it's also true for her fleeting affair with the older captain, Hugh Palliser. This man did exist, but Elizabeth's affair with him did not. It came about without my wanting it – I didn't invent it intentionally.'

'I e-mailed about it with cabaret performer Diederik van Vleuten, another Cook fanatic: 'Guess what happened to me today… Suddenly there's Elizabeth kissing Palliser! That's impossible, the man is too old, but she's doing it! What do I do about that?' That kind of thing never happened to me before while I was writing a book. Those are odd things. I must have headed for it subconsciously, but it simply went like that. Very peculiar.'

'Yes, I'm sure that I looked at the eighteenth century with the eyes of a twenty-first century woman, but in a historical novel you can be in history in a different way because you're making a story out of it. During your research you learn which facts you have to stick to, after that it becomes more playful, perhaps more naïve. As a novelist, you would never imagine the fact that they had six children and that all of them died young. Far too much drama. You have to find a way to solve that. Such limitations sometimes feel like pillars that you can't tear down because they carry the history. Therefore a historical novel does not offer a wide playing field – I have to navigate among those pillars.'

She tried carefully to avoid all sorts of anachronisms. 'Somewhere I chose the word 'journalist', but that profession did not yet exist. There were newspapers, but they weren't published on a daily basis. And I couldn't use an expression like 'going full steam ahead', since the steam engine hadn't been invented yet. It was not yet possible to 'get back on track' either.'

Anna Enquist herself and her life are also present in this novel about James Cook. 'That always happens to me when I write,' she admits. 'It's one of the

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reasons why I continue writing: a book has to relate to your own life. The very fact that Elizabeth lost all these children has something to do with me. Honestly speaking, I think that I wanted to learn something from her, that I wanted to know how she survived all these deaths for such a long time.'

'Since I can't interview her, it's therefore my story about her life that comes out of my imagination. Two people being driven apart, doomed efforts to make it good, the death of a child and their reaction to it, all these are things that I have imagined.'

'Of course you do that in completely imagined novels too: in *The Masterpiece* I tried to imagine how the death of a child would be for the parents. With people to whom that really happened, like Elizabeth Batts, it feels strange. If she were still alive, I might discover that I'm doing her an injustice. But I rather feel that I'm placing her and her children in the limelight. There is an egocentric motivation behind it too: it would be lovely if someone wrote a novel about my daughter two hundred years from now.'

My cautious impression is that Elizabeth Batts did not turn out to be a likeable person. The author has no trouble with that judgment: 'I find her a bit dour. She wouldn't be my friend, but I feel very sorry for her. I have a lot of respect for how she developed in the book; how she survives is impressive. I think that I can judge better how impressive that is than before my daughter died.' Enquist calls to mind the people she creates in her novels: 'I've thought about them; often they are women who aren't very likeable, that's true. The organist I created for *De thuiskomst* is definitely a nice man. For that matter, I believe that it's more important for the novel that the characters are interesting rather than nice. I don't think about whether a person is nice. When I give a talk, people ask me: did you start liking Elizabeth? No, not really.'

Anna Enquist will never be able to get rid of James Cook. 'I told myself that when I finished the book I would reward myself with a membership in the James Cook Society. They publish a newsletter, *Cook's Log*, four times a year. The

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society consists of five hundred aficionados from all over the world who know all the historical details about James Cook. Yes, now I know them too.’

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Sample translation from

The Homecoming by Anna Enquist

(Amsterdam: De Arbeiderspers, 2005)

Translated by J.K. Ringold

p. 13 - 23

He'll expect an empty table when he returns, she thought. He'll carry suitcases and bags filled with journals, sketches, and maps into the house. They should lie flat on a clean table, polished and rubbed until it shines like the surface of a pond. A table that invites placing folders on it and stacks of books and papers in perfect order. Not a scrap heap. The garden room where the table stands – no, there's enough space, it's just that the table is in the centre of the room, there is no getting away from it, the room looks as if its been built around it, a tabernacle for a wooden altar – has to be cleaned and perhaps whitewashed.

Elizabeth moved slowly past the table to the bay window and looked through the square window panes out into the garden. Because of the unevenness of the glass, the flowers seemed to float above the grass when she moved her head. The pale blue irises bulged out into monstrous shapes, and the garden bench shot up and down as she nodded. She pushed open the windows; the white painted wooden slats that framed the panes looked dirty. With her index finger she brushed away a dead fly.

Spring air wafted into the room. Elizabeth put her hands on her hips and inhaled. Hawthorn, stock, sickly sweet fumes from the gin distillery around the corner. The linden above the garden bench would soon start to bloom and drip honey on the furniture and the lawn. Thick clouds of angrily buzzing insects would press around the light green blossoms. Soon.

She turned around to face the dark room. Like a mountain range, the mess on the table rose up in front of her. He's coming back, she thought, in a month, this summer, maybe not until autumn, but he's coming. Somewhere in the world he is under way in that cramped wooden hulk that he so proudly calls his ship. Discoveries have been made, coasts have been mapped, exotic peoples described, and the journey home has been started. Such an expedition can't last longer than three years. Therefore it's high time to start clearing the table. It will be as if I

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were levelling a dump site where someone has thrown his junk for years. An archeological project that I could consider a challenge.

The chill draught blew against her back, the heavy door of the room started moving and banged shut.

Use your arms to sweep everything onto the floor. Get everything ship-shape, clear out the remains of these lonely years. Away with the children's drawings, bills, forgotten mending, unread books, and yellowed newspapers. Throw everything in a pile in the garden, and then, when the wind is still, set fire to it. With a stick push stray papers back into the fire, the boys will help with bellows and broomsticks, and everything, everything will go up in thick smoke and blow away over the roofs to the river.

But everything had to be looked at. Nothing could be thrown away until you knew what it was. Every shred of paper would have to pass through her hands. She pulled her apron strings tighter and stepped to the table.

Extend your hand to pick up a letter and then pull back quickly. Walk around the table and look at the objects from all sides and assess them. Devise a system for organizing it all: put down a basket for everything that can go; a folder for business letters that should be saved; a stack for drawings by the children; one for personal letters; a pile of books to have available, and one with books that would be better to put away until the right moment. Make space on the wide-planked floor so that the stacks can be placed at an ample distance from one another. She knew how she was going to tackle it, but she continued pacing and hesitating.

It was ten o'clock, a morning in early April; the boys were in school and she didn't expect visitors. Here was time that she didn't make use of. What was she waiting for? Not for help – she preferred to perform this task by herself. She didn't sit down on the narrow bench in front of the window; she kept walking around as though she was looking for something.

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She was tired. Everything in her thirty-four-year-old body wanted to lie down on the ground and stay there. Preferably outside, on the grass, under the linden. Her fatigue was inexplicable for she had slept well this last week, she ate enough and had had no unusual exertions. Yet her back felt as if she were carrying a yoke with heavy pails of milk.

From in between the letters and newspapers she picked out what didn't belong there at all: a bonnet with ribbons, a handkerchief, a dried-out orange. The pits tapped against the leathery skin when she flung the fruit to the floor. Bend over. Into the basket. Stand up in a single movement from the bent position and immediately dip into the papers. Good.

A letter from Stephens about money: "*In accordance with the wishes of your husband, the Admiralty have decided to pay you during the voyage a yearly sum of two hundred pounds*." Save it. James would want to read it. It was his money which he earned by sailing around the world. Completely absurd to feel such an annoying feeling of forced gratitude for this. It was no charity, it was no gratuity. She was entitled to that sum, and more. In her mind she saw the gentlemen of the Admiralty together at their meeting, excited about James' venture, filled with pride, patriotism, and self-importance. "Oh yes, that wife of his has to live too, a generous sum of course; will you see to it that she receives it?"

She shrugged her shoulders. The next letter, written by Hugh Palliser, was about the boys.

"*I was told, dear Elizabeth, that your oldest one, plucky James Junior, will enter the naval college in Portsmouth at the end of the summer. He must certainly be looking forward to following his father's footstep, or perhaps I should say in his wake! It is good for you that you'll be able to keep little Nathaniel at home with you for another year, otherwise you'd be quite lonely. Of course we hope that James will return safe and sound, but you are aware of the uncertainties that surround such expeditions. You also know that I'm here for you whenever you might need me*."

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Palliser, the treasurer of the Navy, who had encouraged James and had recommended him, who had brought him forcefully to the attention of the gentlemen. She smiled and put the letter with her own papers. She would invite him for a cup of tea in the garden so that he could talk with Jamie and Nathaniel.

She collected the bills and threw away the newspaper clippings. The base of the stack that she had been working on was exposed: three thick dark books about voyages of discovery in the South Seas. The author's name was printed on the leather in golden letters: John Hawkesworth. She lifted up the volumes and carefully knocked off the dust. James would be furious. Hawkesworth had appropriated his journals and had described the journey as if he had made it himself. She had compared the text with the original logs and had been annoyed at the exaggerations and the mistakes, at the writer, but also at her husband. How stupid to part with your story so naively. It was all well and good that James, with narrow-minded resentment, hated the world of arrogant art and literature lovers, but he shot himself in the foot by handing over his writings and by refusing to be involved with the editing. He said that he was ashamed – he couldn't spell well and was not able to construct correct sentences. That was true, but what he had to say was worthwhile. Someone should help him. I, she thought, I should.

Next to the Hawkesworth volumes lay a drawing of a boat, a carefully worked-out child's drawing, Jamie. He had opened out the side of the ship so that the storerooms with barrels and bales, the hold, and the various cabins were visible. In the captain's cabin he had drawn a seated man, writing at a table, his back to the viewer. On the quarterdeck stood a cow and a goat.

Why shouldn't she be able to help James with his next book? Before long he'd be sitting at the table, sighing and cursing; before long he'd be ruining his text with exaggerated expressions of gratitude and a false display of subservience while his mood worsened steadily. What a shame. Let me do it. If he returns before autumn, the days will already be getting shorter, and long, dark evenings will lie ahead. Working together on something important would be a distraction, a good start of a life together.

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At his return they would be married more than twelve years, but they had not spent a full year at a stretch together in the same house. Invariably James would leave in the spring and not return until November. Christmas. Draw maps and coastal features at the table. He had two lives, as did she. There developed a rhythm and the reassurance that goes with it. She had been frightened once, when he returned with a rough, barely healed scar right across his right hand. A powder horn had blown up, he said, it could have been worse. The maiming of intact skin made her realize that he worked for the Navy and that fighting and destruction could be part of that work. After a day or so her fear disappeared. It had already happened, he moved around the house, she heard his voice and saw his activities. His presence took her mind off the injury and what it signified.

Since then he wore a glove on his right hand. Was he ashamed of the mutilation, or did he not want to frighten others? The wound was raised and seemed healed, the scar moved like a whitish snake across the palm of his hand to the wrist. She could feel it, at night, when he moved his hands from her thighs to her shoulders. The scar rubbed against her skin. She should grab his hand and slowly go over the wound with her tongue, she should incorporate the scar, it should be recorded in the cartography of her husband's body, by her.

There was a lot to do. Meals had to be planned, prepared, and eaten; the boys' clothes had to be washed, repaired, replaced. The vegetable garden seeded, fertilized, weeded. She had help; there were people who assisted her with these tasks and encouraged or even forced her to take control. Nat, who staggered demonstratively through the room on shoes that he had outgrown. The maid, who sat down next to her with a shopping basket on her lap to discuss today's menu. The gardener, who came to ask where the carrots and where the parsnips should be planted, and who could not start work until she had made a decision. There was a lot to do. It seemed more than before, more than during the first years of this second voyage around the world. James' impending return was already starting to colour the daily tasks. He too would have an opinion about the place of

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the vegetables, a reasoned opinion with sensible considerations with regard to the position of the sun and water supply. She started to look at house, garden, and children through his eyes and noticed that much would have to be changed, cleaned, and thrown away. As if she let things go to pot as soon as he was gone, but that wasn't so. Her sense of order was different. Or was the critical captain merely a figment of her imagination? Little Nat crawling into her bed every morning – that would no longer be allowed in the future. That would never again be allowed.

After this voyage it had to stop. After this voyage another life would begin, a summer life.

Twelve long years she had been alone during the summer. It wasn't bad, she had known it when she decided to marry this sailor and had let it sink in. She could handle it, and, certainly in the beginning, she had even looked forward to the solitude. There had always been the reunion; the bed was too large or too small; there was movement and variety. When Jamie was born, she enjoyed being alone even more intensely, being together with the baby. Every autumn the ship returned across the Atlantic. The apples ripened, the leaves turned and started to fall from the trees, and then, suddenly, a carriage rattled through the street and the front door burst open. Wind rushed through the house and everything became different.

Then, in the fall of 1768, he received the commission for the first long voyage. He was to navigate the South Seas, observe the paths of stars and planets, and chart new continents. He had adjusted wonderfully well to the role of commander. Not a trace of obsequiousness or uncertainty had been visible when he made known his demands for the ship, the equipment, and the instruments. He demanded the best, the most expensive, and he received that. But they would not promote him to captain – that title was reserved for nobility. He remained lieutenant. It didn't seem to bother James as long as he could act according to his

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own judgment. Gather knowledge, look, see how the world really is – that's what he wanted.

The voyage would last at least three years. When the ship – a clumsy, flat collier – sailed she had three young children and was pregnant with the fourth. She had felt relieved when James' second cousin Frances came into the household to keep her company. She was a child of seventeen, a girl with a head of red hair and timid eyes. With her awkward, skinny limbs she gave the impression that she would bump into everything and would walk into the door with a full serving tray, but nothing of the sort. She was clever, saw what needed to be done and enjoyed being helpful. She took the boys, five and four years old at the time, into the garden while Elizabeth bathed little Elly. Her bed stood in the boys' room, and the children soon adored her.

For Elizabeth it was as though she finally had a sister. Women in the house, a small daughter, a sister. She had never known that, there had always been men: a stepfather, an uncle, cousins. A husband. Sons. The father whom she had never known, who died when she was barely two and whom she didn't remember at all. What did he say to me, did he lift me up when he came home, did he dance though the room with me? Her mother didn't answer. What had happened before didn't matter; now a stocky, black-haired man was sitting in the kitchen asking for pancakes. He taught her arithmetic and bookkeeping. They had had no other children. She remained the only one, the daughter.

Her mother's brother had two sons with whom Elizabeth grew up. She was the oldest and made up games until the boys went to school and began to dislike girlish stuff. If she'd had a sister, she thought, then it would at least have been two against two. She had withdrawn. She could read well, and the stepfather whom she called father possessed a good number of books to which she had free access. She could embroider and knit. She managed quite well.

She was not allowed in her stepfather's tavern, but she did keep his expenses and income up to date in bound oblong account books. Her handwriting was clear and regular; she was a credit to her parents. If there had been a sister, would she

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have done useless, childish, silly things? Walk arm in arm along the river, peek at boys from under a parasol and then quickly discuss something important when the boys looked back, squeeze each other's arms and then get the giggles?

Uncle Charles saw her working on the bookkeeping in the evening. "Can you do that?" he asked. "Amazing! You should be a boy. Give me a daughter like that!"

She straightened her back, not answering, and went back to the account books. With a steady hand she noted down the daily earnings receipts. She patted the ink dry with blotting paper, and moved the lamp in order to be able to see her work better. A sister would now have stuck her head through the window and called her to come outside for a while, away from the room with the low ceiling where it stank of tobacco smoke and smouldering wood, where the adults spoke of her with pride and satisfaction as if she were as old as they.

Uncle Charles had asked her mother if Elizabeth could come and work for him. His small trade in ship's supplies was located near the river, business was increasing, it was getting too much for him, and his helpers were not as clear-headed as this clever niece. She agreed eagerly; it was exciting that her uncle trusted her and had a higher opinion of her than of his own employees. She was assigned her own small desk in the crowded store and enjoyed the mysterious merchandise: magnifiers in leather cases, sextants, barometers, a variety of globes in various sizes, and the terrifying cases for the ship's doctors. She, Elizabeth Batts, sat amidst all this and wrote down the costs and prices of the incoming and outgoing objects. Most of the time she sat bent over her papers and listened to the cheerful voice of her uncle. She tried to guess the background and character of the customers based on their voices. Sometimes she looked up, made curious because of an unusual word or a lengthy silence. That's how her gaze had fallen on James.

He wanted to buy a quadrant, a complicated instrument of shiny copper with screws and movable arms. Uncle Charles went into the stockroom and returned

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with a stack of boxes. All morning long he examined the instruments with the tall, serious man who stood erect in front of the counter. He rubbed the copper with a flannel cloth and re-packed the rejected instruments. Elizabeth observed the critical client from behind her long hair until he left the store without buying a thing. The boxes were returned to the stockroom and the store looked as though nothing had happened. Uncle Charles whistled a song; blushing, Elizabeth wrote her figures. Soon they would go and eat.

Instant decisions were so typical of her. She knew right away which dress she wanted, she had gone to work in her uncle's store without hesitation, and she recognized her husband when he stepped into her life. Was it an inability to doubt or the capacity to judge unerringly what was good for her? She stood up, firmly smoothed the pleats of her skirt, her fingers drumming her bony hips, and went to question her uncle about the impressive customer who bought nothing. Three months later they were married.

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“The facts,” asked James. “Who was driving the carriage?”

Of course, yes. The coachman had not dared to pay his respects. He’d sent his wife round with half a suckling pig as a peace offering. Frances received her while Elizabeth stood motionless upstairs in the bedroom, at the window.

James turned on his back. “What did you do with the pig?”

She saw the halved carcass in front of her, saw how it lying on a burlap sack next to the stove, pink, with white bone fragments, as big as a child.

“Frances took care of it. Gave it away, buried it, threw it in the river; I don’t know. We never talked about it again.”

I lie here with my husband whom I haven’t seen for three years, talking about a pig, she thought. Our daughter died a violent death, and he asks what we did with the pig. I answer, but beneath this conversation lies a question that we can’t face. I can’t even say it out loud. I can hardly think it. Yet I must.

She lowered herself until she could lay her head next to his on the pillow. She looked over at him and saw that he was crying. It’s my fault. I should have protected her. I was the mother. I closed off the stairs with planking, and I placed the carving knives beyond her reach. I didn’t close the garden gate. I protected her until that one time, my task was almost completed, you were already on your way home, almost – .

James blew his nose and began to speak. At first she didn’t understand what he was talking about and let the sentences roll over her like waves. A coral reef, darkness, a crash, a crack. The ship had jammed and was filling with water. In mortal fear, everyone worked at the pumps, even the officers and the scientists. They threw the cannons, the water supply, and the barrels with meat overboard. After twenty-four hours, they managed, by some miracle, to get the wounded ship afloat again. They drifted rudderless along the reef. He asked his crew for advice; in the half-light of morning in the icy wind, they stood in a circle on the deck while a few meters underneath them water gushed into the hold through a large

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hole. The surgeon's brother came up with a good solution. Under his directions they rubbed manure and bits of rope into a sail, then lashed it to the damaged wall of the ship – it took an immense effort, with cables and pulleys, everyone following orders silently, stony-faced.

It worked. The sail stuck to the ship's shell and gave exactly enough reprieve for them to reach the beach. There they lay for a month to repair the ship.

"I took a great risk," he said, "and I still wonder if I could have acted differently."

Elizabeth was silent. The smell of the river drifted in through the open window. Where is she, where is she – she is in the graveyard, she is alone. Quiet, put away these thoughts, listen.

The ship had been provisionally repaired but it continued to leak. The rigging was in shreds, and the ropes were frayed. They went ashore in the harbour of Batavia. They had to.

"No scurvy on my ship," said James. "For three years I sailed in the most severe conditions and did not lose a single crew member to the sailor's disease. Not one. In Batavia we went ashore brimming with health. The Dutch couldn't believe their eyes. The condition of the ship showed what we had gone through, but the sturdy bodies and the ruddy complexions of the men were incompatible with that. It was my pride. I sat in my cabin and wrote to London: not a single man lost!

It's a question of will power. Discipline. I threatened them with flogging if they didn't wash; I never had to carry out that threat. Air bedding, clean clothes as soon as weather permitted. The shirts crunched with salt from the seawater, but still. I held back the drink ration when they made a mess in the hold. In the beginning that caused trouble because they were not used to it. A sailor thinks it's macho to walk around in the same shirt for three years. They no longer notice the stench, or they've become attached to it."

He's not yet home, she thought. He was unable to keep up with the speed of his ship and is rushing after it. He's not yet able to lie in his own bed and cry

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about his child. He's still on the deck, screaming and handing out canvas buckets to haul up water. He is lying here but he's not here yet.

Eating, that was of prime importance. If he were able to find a remedy against the disease it would mean a giant step forward in the history of seafaring. Diet had to be the key. It was standard for gums to swell after about six weeks at sea. Sailors' teeth would loosen and fall out. Black and blue spots would form under the skin because the veins could no longer hold blood. It oozed into muscles and joints until movement became impossible. The pain was unbearable; it forced the sick person to lie still until death came. They found it normal, the gentlemen of the Navy, a law of nature! They took it into account with recruitment: always enlist more men than needed because half would certainly die. That was prudent. He thought it was stupid. Why would a person fall ill at sea and not on shore? What was the difference? There had to be a reason for it. Pay attention. Think. Experiment. Don't resign yourself to facts that were not understood. Try to penetrate them instead.

Elizabeth still remembers that she felt a fit of envy when the tempo of his narrative accelerated and his voice deepened. He was excited about something, there was something for which he felt enthusiasm, something that he wanted. And what did she want? Storm, she wanted an icy storm that would whip the waves of the Thames against the quay. She would tie a bonnet tightly on her head, take the heavy shawl, and go walking. To nowhere, against the wind, step by step. But the river was a calm mirror and the air was sultry.

On land the men received fresh food; you didn't touch the supplies if there was game to shoot and fruit to pick. Somewhere in there was the solution. At sea they ate salted meat that gave off an awful stench and rock-hard ships' biscuit bored full of holes by maggots. The ship had to become shore, had to be an island where animals and plants could live. Chickens! Gardens in crates behind the mast! But the wind blew the birds off the ship, and the rain washed away the soil.

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Yet he had sought a solution in imitating the circumstances of land as well as possible. He started by dismissing the cook, a lazy, stupid man who showed no interest at all in the food problem. The replacement who presented himself by order of the Navy was a tall fellow with whom one could consult effectively. He had no objection to incorporating dried peacakes, carrot juice, and meat extract in his dishes, and of his own accord suggested dried figs and raisins. Unfortunately his left arm had been torn off by a snapped cable, but he had developed amazing dexterity with his right arm.

Was she still listening? She could hear him, the words surged through the bedroom, and she felt his ribs and his chest vibrate. She found it strange not to be alone anymore; odd that someone pricked holes in her thoughts and came in between them with images and concepts that were irrelevant to her. He is your husband, she thought, listen, muster your attention.

The garden project failed, but the desire for greens remained the guiding principle of the changes in the ship's menu. Whoever went ashore was not only to fill water barrels and set up the telescope as usual, but was to keep his eyes open for anything green and was not allowed to return without a bunch of greens in his shirt: bishop's weed, mallow, comfrey, and whatever looked possible. The galley boy collected the contributions and took them to his boss who used his one arm to cut everything into small pieces on the chopping block. In the morning he stirred the bitter puree into the barley porridge. Breakfast.

What if there was no land? There was always sauerkraut. Everyone had declared him crazy when he had the stinking vats dragged aboard ship. The finely cut cabbage strips fermented in the salt, explosions were prevented by heavy stones on the lids. Who would be able to get that sour rot past their throats? The sailors gagged when they walked through the storeroom. James doubted that threats of beatings with a cane would do any good here. "It made me think of our boys," he said. He turned toward her. The tanned skin of his neck was pale white where the collar of his uniform had been. When Jamie and Nat saw their parents eat something not offered to them, they would insist on it and whine until they

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were allowed to taste it. He had ordered the cook to serve the sauerkraut only to the officers, and they in turn received instructions to spoon it out liberally and loudly praise the taste of the dish. The crew protested against the inequality. They demanded sauerkraut.

What is it about, she thought. Her hands lay folded on her stomach as if paralyzed. In the distance she saw the blanket bulge where her feet should be, but she felt nothing. Even her thoughts seemed to be stripped of fire.

The child died because I didn't pay attention.

The words were there but they had no meaning. Guilt. Disaster. Sauerkraut.

James' voice: "That's how it went. Everyone remained healthy. No loose teeth, no knee joints like blue cannonballs. Strong and glowing with health we arrived in Batavia. I wanted to let my carpenters do the repairs themselves. The stingy Dutch refused; they wanted to make money, of course. Arguments, delay. In the end I won, but by then it was too late and marsh fever had struck. Whatever I ordered: disinfect, sulphurize – it no longer helped. My men were delirious with fever and couldn't keep food down. The Dutch might earn their money by patching up the ship, but I did not pay the bill! One man died after another. We even had to bury the doctor. I left without the harbourmaster's permission. At sea the dying continued; every day we had to lower bodies of crew members into the sea. Men with whom we had shared all adventures for three years. It hardly registered, you know. I was furious at those Dutch with their dirty stinking canals. Meanwhile my triumphant letter was on its way to London."

She tried to imagine the ship of death, the corpses sown into canvas that were weighted with stones, put on a plank and tipped. There would have been a Bible reading, and the call of a bugle. Frightened or disheartened the survivors would have stood in a semi-circle on the deck. While I washed sheets in the scullery, she thought. While I didn't pay attention. How can we bring those two worlds together? Hopeless, an impossible task. In the distance, near the river, geese suddenly screeched. The alarming noise swelled and died down. Who read out the Bible on board? It was the doctor's task because James refused to take along a

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useless minister, but the doctor was dead. If no one was left alive who could play the bugle, was the ceremony performed in silence? Creaking ropes, the crash of the plank against the rail, the splash when the corpse cleaved the water surface.

"Elizabeth," said James, "I lost thirty men within a few weeks. Thirty men. You could say that it was my fault. I was the commander. I decided to put in at Batavia. I gave the crew permission to go ashore. I should have taken care of my men so that they would come home safely. That was my task and I failed. I took risks. The fact that we stranded on the reef was the result of such a risk. It turned out amazingly well, but it could have gone completely wrong. Batavia was also a risk. That's where things went wrong. Under my command. I've thought about it a lot, it kept me awake during the whole journey back. Did I send thirty men to their deaths? Kill them? I don't know. I was eaten up by regret, and still am, regret to have pinned my hope on the Dutch and their stinking settlement. Remorse, guilt. Anger too. I was unable to stay in bed because of rage. What happened there thwarted my plans. I didn't want to see my men waste away; I didn't cause that disease to come over us, I – ."

He was silent. She heard his excited breathing gradually become regular and calm. The room turned grey, morning approached.

"It happened. A calamity happens. You can't anticipate it, not always. In a sense you're at the mercy of circumstances. You're obliged to be as careful as possible. You're not infallible. Your power reaches as far as it does. No farther. There always remains a domain where you're powerless. I can't actually accept that, but I have realized that it is like that. Do you understand?"

The sky was pale yellow outside the window. It seemed as if things in her head were lightening with it. She pulled up her legs and stretched her stiff muscles. She felt the warmth of the man who lay next to her. It happens, she thought, you deal with your fear and your reason, and you make a decision that usually works out well and sometimes, fatally, not. The guilt remains because you are tied to your decision. Yet we are at the mercy of what happens. I, he.

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The stiffness had left her body. She nestled against James. It was morning by the time they fell asleep, exhausted.

How long did she still have? A month, six weeks? She shivered and inhaled the sweet metallic smell of the river water. This homecoming would be different. The prospect of a solid existence with a man who was at home and remained home would make her strong. She stepped away from the embankment and was aware of the strength in her calves. Her bonnet was untied; she pulled it from her head so that she could feel the wind through her hair. I'm standing near the river, she thought, a new life is coming and I'm going to be part of it without second thoughts. She turned her back to the water. The sun had finally evaporated the grey clouds and warmed the dark fabric of her dress. Nothing wrong, just feel, even the sunlight supports me.

She peered down the wharf and in the distance she saw a small thin figure walking, carrying a black case.

One windy day, some time after Elly's funeral, she had met the organist in the street. At first she didn't recognize him because she barely looked around during these daily walks of despair; she had to go onwards, one foot in front if the other, the minutes had to pass, the hours filled with actions that did not refer to a future which was unbearable anyway. She had to walk, she could not bear people in the street looking at her and pretended that she was alone in the busy city. She felt misshapen, visibly damaged and humiliated. She had to hide but suffocated in the gloomy house. Therefore she walked.

"Mrs. Cook?" said a soft voice near her face. Startled she'd looked up, she'd blinked to focus and had seen Hartland's friendly face. He gazed penetratingly at her, not smiling. She remembered their strange contact during the prayer and how he had wanted to comfort her later with his well-chosen music. She was welcome, he'd said at their bleak meeting. He often thought of her, and would be happy to receive her whenever her walks tired her and she wanted a break with someone.

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She had surprised herself by going several times to his house. His housekeeper served tea, or beer if the day was warm, and she sat in the organist's cluttered study without speaking. He leafed through his scores and told her of the power of music. On the wall hung instruments: flutes, an oboe, a violin.

What am I doing here, she thought, what business do I have here? I know nothing about music, what do I want of this man, this makes no sense at all. Slowly she came to understand that it did make sense. He was an outcast, an outsider like herself, at the time. The way he fought to retain space and attention for music in the church service was the way she wanted to fight for the memory of her daughter.

When little Nathanial heard the violin player on the deck of the *Resolution*, he was completely captivated by it. Day in day out he had chattered to her about how he wanted to be able to do that too, to play those songs; he would become a violinist; he wanted a violin.

She asked Hartland for advice, and Nat got violin lessons. At first the boy would run to the organist to have him tune the instrument every time that he wanted to practise. Soon he could do it himself. When he played she sat at the kitchen table and listened. He told her stories without words. His passionately being able to love something that he had discovered all on his own made her happy.

There he was, her youngest son. The violin case swung from his long, skinny arm, and the wind blew the thin blond hair into his eyes. He saw her standing and waved with his free hand. In a year he too would go to the naval college; what else could captain's children do? it was the natural course of things. He didn't want to, but he didn't know any better – but now, here, he walked carrying his violin and smiled at his waiting mother.

Suddenly she knew that everything would turn out all right. The boys would have a father who would no longer go away, who would talk to them of seamanship and the starry sky and science, who would be satisfied with what he

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had attained and would have complete attention for his children's careers. They were a family. Everything would turn out all right.

In a flash the sharply defined features of Hugh Palliser's face appeared in front of her. That morning in her kitchen something had happened that she could not think back to. She still felt the skin of his arm against her lips, and was startled. She groaned involuntarily. It's nothing, she thought, a weakness, unexplainable and temporary – it's nothing. With all her force she pushed aside the memory of the man who had bared his arm for her. There was Nathaniel. He ran up to her and she caught him in her arms.

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