



PHILIPPE CLAUDEL

 LANNOO

ARARAT

Inspired by CARL DE KEYZER's photographs in *Higher Ground*.

By PHILIPPE CLAUDEL.

Translated from the French by EUAN CAMERON.

“When I was a child, I used to be frightened that the mountains would collapse and fall down on me. I was constantly asking the adults around me whether they really were secured properly, whether I was in any danger.”

“Together with a guy I met at the beginning, who was in the same cable car that brought us up here, we rebelled. We reckoned that what had happened to us was unfair. We tried to escape by every means possible. We discovered some pickaxes in an equipment store – crowbars, tools like that. We started to attack the rock face. It was very solid. Exhausting. We took it in turns. We were worn out, but we didn't stop. We managed to dig a tunnel one metre in diameter and ten metres deep. It took us – I don't know, we didn't even bother to count – one year, perhaps two, how could we tell? In the end we gave up. What was the point? I don't know what became of the fellow. I don't come across him any more. I never knew his name. A guy like me.”

“I think that all the people who are here are vaguely aware that nothing exists any more. At the beginning, I tried to talk about it. No sound came out of my mouth. Nor from the mouth of any of the others either, and yet I could see them trying to pronounce them. The sounds die immediately; they dissolve in the atmosphere. Or else I've become deaf. I really don't know. We are dumbfounded. Before, I was a writer. I wrote novels and plays. There are no books here. Nothing. There's nothing to read, other than the advertising hoardings, always the same ones, and various notices, here and there. That's all. We go round in circles. I miss reading more than writing. Well actually, I'm not sure. What I really do miss is talking to someone. I'm unable to speak. And it's the same for the others. The moment we open our mouths, when we try to utter sounds or words, nothing happens. The words subside, like water, liquid gas, mist. Nothing substantial. You'll have noticed there's no noise. It's the same with the birds. No chirping. No singing. Even their wings are silent. Are you able to read me? I've always had lousy writing. Give me back this little scrap of paper when you've finished, please; I've very little left.”

“I play. All day long. I’m not sad. I don’t know where my parents are. I think they’re also playing. Somewhere. I laugh a lot. The others do too. We’re fine. I love staying in the mountains.”

“What about you, do you know what has happened? Have you been told? Do you think we’ll be able to get out one day?”

“A bloke came up to the sheep. The sheep had done nothing to him. They were there, like us. They were victims too. Well, that’s one way of looking at it. The bloke approached. I recognised him. To begin with, he often used to walk round the small reservoir. He’s got a large tattoo on his back, with wings or something like that. He drew closer. The sheep looked at him. He bent down to pick up a big stone, and he started to kill them. He killed the sheep one by one. The sheep didn’t run away. They stood there calmly. They watched him kill the other sheep and each one awaited its turn. The bloke went on and on hitting. The problem was that when he thought he had just killed one sheep, and the animal fell down, all bloody and with its head smashed in, and he moved on to the next one, the sheep that was dead eventually got to its feet, unscathed, the blood on its coat vanished, and its skull intact once more; the bloke continued hitting out and killing, but no sheep died. I think he must still be at it. In the end, we grew tired of watching him. We left him on his own.”

“I don’t know where the trucks that set off are going. Nor even who makes the decisions about these trucks. There are women and men waiting, by the cable car, the second one, the one that goes up. The other, the one that goes down, doesn’t operate any more. Well, I assume they’re waiting. I don’t actually know.”

“I believe I was asked to do that. They were the boss’s orders, before he went away, when it was still open. To place bottles of wine and pre-packed lunches on all these tables. The room is big, but it’s not huge, and yet I’ve always done my job. Everything takes so long. I don’t understand. It’s as though all this had no ending – or beginning either.”

“The sight of mountains is very soothing to me. When I look at the view, I no longer think. It’s better that way.”

“I tried to urinate to begin with. I went into the toilets. I was alone. I unzipped the fly on my trousers, I grabbed my cock, and I stood there like that for hours, maybe for days. Nothing. Nothing at all. In the end, I got bored. I put my little tool back in my underpants. I zipped up my fly. That was it. Over. I’ve never wanted to go again.”

“They set us down in front of a glass of beer. Normally, my husband likes beer. But he’s not touching it. And I can’t even ask him why he isn’t touching it. Why he doesn’t taste it. It’s ridiculous. The beer is there. In front of him. He doesn’t try it. I really don’t understand. At times, he looks at me, but he often looks outside, at the peaks and the snow. And when he does look at me again, I have the feeling that he doesn’t recognise me. I might as well be a stone myself or a block of ice. It’s the same thing.”

“I tried to eat, but it doesn’t go down. In any case, I’m no longer hungry or thirsty. All I feel like is a cigarette. But no one has had any for a long time.”

“I’m dreadfully cold. I’m almost naked. The sun’s not very warm. I don’t know why I’m like this, in my underpants, while all around me other people are dressed warmly. I’m convinced that I fell asleep. And that certain people took the opportunity to steal my clothes. I was stripped. It’s vile. It’s inhuman. Frankly, it’s disgusting. I’m still lying down, on the ground. I can feel the biting cold, the icy wind. I want to die. For it to be over. I feel ridiculous. I’m in pain. I’m all huddled up. Is this supposed to be living? I feel so awful, but I don’t die. I’m not even ill. My nose doesn’t run. I don’t have a sore throat. Not a thing. It’s ghastly. And impossible for me to leave. My body weighs a great deal. I shiver. I have no strength. The others are warm. They’re probably happy. They strut about. Those that robbed me. Shits! Arseholes! Bastards! Filth! I can’t pull myself up. What’s to become of me?”

“What’s the point of what you’re doing? What use will it be? You’re in the same boat as well. You’re no cleverer than us.”

“I was never a believer. Beforehand, I mean. But here, the notion of God gradually took hold. I attend services. Not so much from a desire not to be bored as from trying to establish a dialogue. I can’t believe that all this should be meaningless, that we are here, all those of us who are here, because of a wrong turn, because of an alteration in the geographical data and the physical laws of the planet that nobody could have anticipated. I’m now convinced that a superior power has determined this. We are in his hands, at his mercy. We must be humble. The restricted universe in which we are confined suggests as much. Look at the vast size of everything. I see these mountains as an injunction to modesty, an invitation to believe. During my life, I ran a consultancy in scholarship placements.”

“Personally, I didn’t want to come. And then, all of a sudden, here I am, and I don’t know how to get out. It’s no joke.”

“What I regret is not having locked up my house, even though I realise that it’s absurd to think like that. There’s no point. I’ll never see it again.























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