

Spirit of Bosnia / Duh Bosne

An International, Interdisciplinary, Bilingual, Online Journal
Međunarodni, interdisciplinarni, dvojezični, online časopis

Aska and the Wolf

Ivo Andrić

This happened in the sheep world on the Sloping Meadows. Aja, a big ewe with thick fleece and round eyes, gave birth to her first lamb, who looked like all newborns, a fist of damp wool starting to bleat. It was a girl, an orphan, because a few days earlier Aja had lost her husband whom she dearly loved. The mother called her child Aska, thinking the name most suitable for a soon-to-be, gorgeous sheep.

During the first few days, the lamb, like all young lambs, followed her mother, but when it started to run on her still rigid and uncommonly long legs and graze by herself, the lamb showed her temperament. She did not hide under her mother's skirt, she did not listen to her mother's calling or the clanging bell on the lead ram's horn, but she loved to wander on paths that she found for herself and seek out pastures to graze in far-away places.

Aja sharply admonished her otherwise well-behaved, intelligent, and beautiful daughter. Aja gave Aska firm advice and strong rebukes, to teach her the many risks of this sort of behavior in a neighborhood like theirs, where always runs some cunning and bloodthirsty wolf, the kind of wolf that does not fear the shepherds and kills ewes and their young, especially when they splinter off and meander about. Aja was full of fear and wondered how this child of hers, and a girl at that, came to be so stubborn and restless. No matter whom she took after, the "babe" – that's how one calls young boys and girls in the sheep world – was a great worry to her mother. In school, Aska was clever and progressed quickly. But every time when her mother went to school to ask about her grades and performance, the teacher would go on and on about how Aska could do much better if she were not so distracted. It was only in physical education that she continuously excelled with high marks.

One day, after Aska had passed her classes with only modest success, she stood before her mother and told her that she wanted to go to ballet school. At first, her mother strongly opposed the idea, providing many reasons against it, each one more convincing than the last. Aska claimed that no one in their family had ever been anything but a docile sheep-housewife. Art, in her mother's words, was an unstable calling that neither fed nor protected anyone who took it up. The ways of art were dubious, deceptive, and hard, and dancing was the hardest and most deceptive of arts, even a disreputable and dangerous one. No sheep from a good family had ever followed such a path, and so on. Finally, what would the rest of the sheep community

say if they heard that her daughter had taken just such a path?

This is how the well-meaning, worried mother spoke to Aska. But knowing her daughter's nature, Aja understood that her daughter's desire was stronger than her capacity for self-denial. And she yielded. She enrolled her young lamb in ballet school, hoping to restrain her temperament, even though the sheep and the rams of the flock were in general highly critical of the mother's decision.

One could not say that Aja was indifferent toward the reproaches and gossip heard among the sheep and the rams in their cotes and pastures, but a mother loves her child so much that she accepts, in time, all her child's attributes, even those of which she does not approve of within her own soul. As time passed, the mother reconciled herself to her daughter's wishes and started to look differently on the whole matter. She wondered what, after all, could be so wrong with art? And dance was the most noble of all the arts, the only one that relied entirely upon one's own body.

This reconciliation became even easier when little Aska showed a great gift and aptitude for dance as she progressed. Along with this, the girl was as innocent and as guileless as anyone could wish. But her strange and dangerous habit of wandering far away from the sheep's pastures did not fade. And one day, the event that Aja was so afraid of actually happened.

Aska finished the first class of ballet school with the highest marks and was about to begin the second class. It was the start of autumn; the sun was strong but beginning to fade and there were brief, warm showers that made a happy rainbow over the wet, sunny fields. That day Aska was very happy and very carefree. Taken by the freshness of the day and the beauty of the delicious grass, she journeyed to the far edge of the beech woods and even into them. The grass was especially juicy in that area, she thought, deep inside the woods.

The sun drove away the milky fog still lingering in the woods like the remains of some night dance—white, bright, and quiet. The low visibility and the total silence made the area's aura one in which space and distance had no measure and one in which time lost its meaning.

Running through the bright, green fields, one after another, Aska inhaled the scents of the old bent beeches covered with mosses like the opiate of a story about an extraordinary event. It seemed to her that this story with its uncountable number of remarkable experiences had no end. Then, when she arrived at one of the fields—she found herself suddenly face to face with an awful wolf. Tricky, old, and perky, he had crept into the field to which wolves do not usually come at that time of year. His fur, green and brown, made it possible for him to blend easily with the autumn beeches and dry grasses.

The beautiful scene that had charmed Aska suddenly lifted like a thin, sly curtain, and in front of her stood a wolf with searing eyes, bent tail, and a false smile spread across its teeth, far scarier than her mother's admonishments. Her blood froze and her thin legs could not move. She remembered to call for her relatives and she opened her mouth, but there was no sound. Death was standing in front of her, an enigmatic but

still certain, horrible, incredible fact.

The wolf made a half-circle around his motionless victim, slowly and softly as usually precedes a wolf's pounce. He was incredulous (if wolves can be said to be capable of doubting) as well as suspicious (which wolves are quite capable of) of a trap: How did a young, white, pretty lamb wander so far astray as to step right into his jaws?

For his victim, there were strange, unexpected moments, somewhere between mortal horror (into which she had entered) and the unbearable, bloody, final fact hidden behind the word, death. This gave the terrified Aska a tiny bit of time, when she thought there was none left, and the time was so short that it did not seem like time at all. She felt that she still had strength for movement, but it was not a movement to protect herself because she was not capable of that. Her last movement would only be dance.

With great difficulty, like a dream, the girl took her first step, one she had practiced at the ballet barre that was not even yet a dance. Quickly, she took another step, and then another. They were small, modest steps for a body destined to die soon, but they were enough to befuddle for a moment the astonished wolf. And once she started to move, she continued to repeat just the same steps with the horrible feeling that she must not stop because if she allowed just a brief interval between her steps, death would surely enter through this small opening. She made steps in the sequence that she had learned in school as if she were hearing her teacher's voice, "One and two, one and two." She performed in that order everything she had learned during the first year of school. Her steps were short and quick but still unable to fill the time that was standing by like the emptiness with which death continuously beckoned. She then progressed to the figures she had learned without the support of a ballet barre in the middle of the school hall. But her abilities and knowledge were limited to just that. She could make two or three figures as they were meant to be performed and she did them with dread. First one, then another, and then a third. And that was the limit of her knowledge and skills. She then repeated the steps, fearing that she might lose some power and beauty by repeating them. And in vain she tried to remember something more that she could do to overcome the event that awaited her at the end. Time passed. The wolf waited and watched, and he started to come closer, and in front of her all doors to classical ballet were closing and the voice of her teacher became more and more faint, eventually disappearing. Her knowledge had developed to a good point, but now it had come to an end. Her skills had abandoned her, her school could not teach her anything more, but she had to live and, if she wanted to live, she had to perform a dance.

And Aska began to dance with freedom beyond any of the school's rubrics or training, outside of anything that can be taught or learned.

Who knows if this world, since its beginnings, has ever seen what the modest and nameless woods above the Sloping Meadows saw that day?

Over the green meadow, through tight passages, between grey, hard beech trees and above the smooth and brown carpet of leaves that fall year after year in layers, Aska, the lamb, danced, no longer a lamb, not yet a ewe, light and lively, like white

milkweed carried by the wind, becoming grayish when she entered a patch of fog, becoming abaze like a stage show when she entered a meadow covered by sun.

The plodding step and fixed gaze of the old wolf, the perpetual, invisible butcher of her flock, followed her.

The cagey, cool, and proverbially wary wolf, who was afraid of neither people nor animals, was at first surprised. This attitude, though, slowly turned into a marveling and irrepressible curiosity. Initially, he remembered who he was, what he was, where he was, and what he had to do, saying to himself: "Let me just witness this amazing wonder. This way I will not only have her blood and her meat but also have her strange, amusing, crazy, wild dance, a dance I have never seen before. Her blood and meat are mine any time I would like and anyway I can take them, but not till the very end of the dance, when I have seen the entire wonder."

Thinking like this, the wolf followed the lamb, stopping when she stopped and moving whenever she speeded up the movements of the dance.

Aska was not thinking anything. From her tiny body, which was solely sustained with the sap of the joy of life but which was destined soon to die, Aska employed her unusual strengths and amazing skills of movement. She knew but one thing: "She lived and she will continue to live while she danced and as long as she did just that." She danced, and it was no longer a dance; it was a wonder.

Then arose another wonder: the wolf's initial astonishment turned into admiration, a thing completely unknown to the wolf's nature because if wolves could admire anything in the world, they would not be what they are. This previously unknown feeling of wonder so penetrated the wolf that this forsaken lamb, terrified of death, dragged the wolf along with her as if she were towing him with an unseen rope tethered to an invisible ring fastened on his snout.

Walking like a sleepwalker, not looking where he passed and not considering the direction in which he was headed, the wolf kept repeating to himself, "The blood and the meat of this lamb are mine anyhow. I can tear her apart at any moment, whenever I would like. But I want to see the wonder, to see this one last movement, and then the next."

And so on, one step after another, and another, but each one entirely new and exciting, promising yet another, still even more exciting step, Aska passed from one field to another, through one clearing to another, into dark forests, and under damp passages between beech trees covered with huge, mature leaves.

Aska was feeling as if there were a hundred lives inside her, and she used all their strength to preserve the one life that she had and that was already past regretting.

We do not know what strength or what possibilities lie hidden in any living creature. Nor do we imagine all that we can do. We live and we die, but we do not know all that we could have become or could have done. Such insight is revealed to us only during momentous and exceptional events such as this one in which Aska danced her movements having already lost the life she had. Her body did not tire any longer now,

and her dancing renewed her strength for yet more dancing. And Aska danced. She performed newer and newer figures, figures that no school and no ballet teacher had ever before imagined.

When she thought that the wolf was coming to an awareness of who he was and what he was, Aska hastened her dancing and courage. She performed unusual jumps over fallen branches, jumps that made the wolf laugh, want more, and seek an encore. She jumped over fallen limbs onto pillows of moss that covered them, standing only on her two back legs, swirling herself like a merry spinning top which dazzles the viewers' eyes. After that she would stand up straight, only on her front legs, running through various flat and green lawns along the woods with her tiny, fast hooves. When she would come upon a hill, she would plunge herself down its slope, pretending she was a brazen skier going down a hill made from smoothed-over, dry leaves, just as fast as when a person runs his thumb across the piano keys: woof. And the wolf would follow her as quickly as he could, not to miss seeing any part of the dance movement. He kept trying to convince himself that he had her blood and her meat, but he just wanted to see the end of the dance. This end, though, was starting to look less and less attainable every second because the dance was overwhelming him and making him forget all else.

Neither of them now measured either the time or the length of the path. She was alive and he was enjoying himself.

When the shepherds heard the woeful voice of Aja and sensed the apprehensive mood passing through the flock, they selected among themselves two younger men and sent them into the woods for the lost, wayward lamb. One of them had only an old bludgeon, but a stout one, and the other carried a rifle, if we could even call it that. It was an old and famous musket, mentioned in the tale of the shepherd's father killing a wolf lurking at the outer edge of the flock. Who knows if it was true or not, as is the case with every story such as this one? Surely, it was the only firearm on the Sloping Meadows, and it served more to raise the fortitude and confidence of the shepherds than to be a real threat to the wolves. They came to the edge of the forest and hesitated a bit, wondering in which direction to move. The forest had thousands of entrances, and who could detect tracks of a lamb's hooves. They went along a trail of green grass and rich pasture as their best bet. They had luck. Just as they entered deeper into the forest and climbed a small hill, they saw in front of them a bizarre sight. They stopped and were silent. Through a deep opening in the boughs they could see Aska performing over the green meadows brave and precise pirouettes followed by the tired, old wolf just a few steps behind.

For a few moments the shepherds stood like stones because of this wonder, but then they awoke. When Aska came to the tree line, suddenly changing the character and the rhythm of her dance, and the wolf was still standing in the field, turned sideways to the observers, the older shepherd took off his musket, aimed, and fired. The forest echoed, and frightened birds flung down the dry leaves.

At the edge of the clearing, an unexpected thing happened. Aska fell like a hit bird in flight during a stopped movement, and the wolf ran into the forest like a green shadow.

The shepherds ran to find Aska unconscious. She had no injuries, but she was lying on the forest grass as if dead. There was a bloody trail behind the wolf.

The older shepherd reloaded his musket, and the younger one took his bludgeon in both of his hands tracking the bloody trail. They went slowly and carefully. They, though, did not have to go far. The wounded wolf had only enough strength to walk a hundred steps while his wound was still fresh. Then he fell. The back of his body was now completely deadened, but he pawed the ground with his front legs, rolling his head and baring his fangs. They easily finished him off.

The sun had just passed the sky's midline when the shepherds returned. They passed through dark fields between flocks and corrals. The younger one had tied the back legs of the wolf together and easily dragged his bloody, long body down the hill. The older one was carrying the white lamb. He had put the lamb, as was a shepherd's habit, over his neck. Aska's pretty head hung over his left shoulder as if dead.

There was great joy on the Sloping Meadows. Ceaselessly there were congratulations and joy, reproaches and tears, screams and joyful bleating.

Aska became conscious. She slowly awoke, lying in the grass unmoving, more like a superfluous fist of wool than a live lamb. She felt as if there was not one normal muscle or tendon that did not ache. Her mother, teary and happy, fussed over her daughter, and all the sheep and rams gathered around to witness the wonder.

Aska was ill for a long time and recovered very slowly from her harrowing experience, but her youth and passion for life, along with her mother's care and the general compassion of her neighbors on the Sloping Meadows, helped her get through. In time, Aska felt better and even became an obedient daughter and fine student, and with time the prima ballerina on the Sloping Meadows.

It was written and it was sung all over the world how Aska, the lamb, prevailed over the gruesome wolf. Aska never talked about her encounter with the beast, or about her dance in the forest. One usually does not talk about the hardest and greatest event of one's life. After several years, when she was fully recovered from her formidable experience, Aska choreographed a famous ballet based on her encounter, which critics and audiences called "The Dance with Death," but which Aska always called "The Dance for Life."

Aska lived happily thereafter; she became a world-class ballerina, and she died at a ripe old age.

Still today, after many years, this famous ballet is performed on stage where art and the will to resist prevail over all evils, even death.

Translated by Irma Alićajić © 2009 Irma Alićajić, English translation

With the permission from **The Ivo Andrić Foundation, Beograd, Serbia**,

The preceding text is copyright of the author and/or translator and is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License.