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A painting by Aharon Appelfeld titled 'Katerina'. It depicts a woman with dark hair, wearing a vibrant red dress, seated at a light-colored wooden table. She is looking towards the viewer with a contemplative expression. On the table in front of her is a bowl of colorful fruit. The background is dark and textured, suggesting an interior setting. The overall style is expressive and somewhat somber.

Aharon  
Appelfeld  
Katerina

PENGUIN MODERN CLASSICS

*Katerina*

Aharon Appelfeld authored more than forty-five acclaimed works of fiction and non-fiction and received many international awards, including the MLA Commonwealth Award, the Independent Foreign Fiction Prize, the Prix Médicis étranger, the Israel Prize and the Nelly Sachs Prize. Born in Czernowitz, Bukovina (now part of Ukraine), in 1932, he survived the Holocaust and passed away in Israel in 2018.

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AHARON APPELFELD

*Katerina*

*Translated from the Hebrew by Jeffrey M. Green*



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*Katerina*

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## I

My name is Katerina, and I will soon be eighty years old. After Easter I returned to my native village and to my father's farm, small and dilapidated, with no building left intact except this hut where I'm living. But it has one single window, open wide, and it allows in the breadth of the world. My eyes, in truth, have grown weaker, but the desire to see still throbs within them. At noon, when the light is most powerful, open space expands before me as far as the banks of the Prut, whose water is blue this season, vibrant with splendor.

I left this place behind more than sixty years ago – to be precise, sixty-three years ago – but it hasn't changed much. The vegetation, that green eternity which envelops these hills, stands tall. If my eyes do not deceive me, it's even greener. A few trees from my distant childhood still stand straight and sprout leaves, not to mention that enchanting, wavelike movement of these hills. Everything is in its place, except for the people. They've all left and gone away.

In the early morning hours, I remove the heavy veils that obscure the many years and examine them, with silent observation, face to face, as they say in Scripture.

The summer nights in this season are long and splendid, and not only are the oaks reflected in the lake, but the simple reeds also draw vigor from that clear water. I always loved that modest lake, but I especially loved it during the brilliant summer nights,

when the line between heaven and earth is erased and the whole cosmos is suffused with heavenly light. The years in a foreign land distanced me from these marvels, and they were obliterated from my memory, but not, apparently, from my heart. Now I know that light is what drew me back. Such purity, oh Lord! Sometimes I wish to stretch out my hand and touch the breezes that meet me on my way, because in this season they are soft as silk.

It's hard to sleep on these brilliant summer nights. Sometimes it seems to me that it's a sin to sleep in this brilliance. I understand now what it says in the Holy Scriptures: 'He who stretches out the heaven like a thin curtain.' The word *curtain* always sounded strange and distant. Now I can see the thin curtain.

Walking is very hard for me. Without the broad window, which is open wide, without it taking me out and bringing me in, I would be locked up here like in prison, but this opening, by its grace, brings me out easily, and I wander over the meadows as in my youth. Late at night, when the light dims on the horizon, I return to my cage, my hunger sated and my thirst slaked, and I shut my eyes. When I close my eyes I encounter other faces, faces I haven't seen before.

On Sundays I pull myself together and go down to the chapel. The distance from my hut to the chapel isn't great, a quarter of an hour's walk. In my youth I used to cover the distance in a single bound. Then all my life was a single puff of breeze, but today, though every step is painful, that walk is still very important to me. These stones awaken my memory, especially the memory from before memory, and I see not only my departed mother but everyone who ever passed over these paths, knelt, wept, and prayed. For some reason it now seems that they all used to wear fur coats. Maybe because of a nameless peasant, who came here secretly, prayed, and afterward took his life with his own hand. His shouts pierced my temples.

The chapel building is old and rickety yet lovely in its simplicity. The wooden buttresses that my father installed still protect it. My father wasn't scrupulous about keeping our religion, but he saw it as his duty not to neglect this small sanctuary. I remember, as though in a twilight, the beams he carried on his shoulders, thick staves, and the way he pounded them into the earth with a huge wooden mallet. My father seemed like a giant to me then, and his work was the work of giants. Those beams, though they've rotted, are still rooted in their place. Inanimate objects live a long life; only man is snatched away untimely.

Whoever thought I would come back here? I had erased this first bosom from my memory like an animal, but a person's memory is stronger than he is. What the will doesn't do is done by necessity, and necessity ultimately becomes will. I'm not sorry I returned. Apparently, it was ordained.

I sit on the low bench in the chapel for an hour or two. The silence here is massive, perhaps because of the valley that surrounds the place. As a girl I used to run after cows and goats on these trails. How blind and marvelous my life was then. I was like one of the animals I drove, strong like them and just as mute. Of those years no outward trace remains, just me, the years crammed into me, and my old age. Old age brings a person closer to himself and to the dead. The beloved dead bring us close to God.

In this valley I heard a voice from on high for the first time – actually, it was in the lowest slopes of this valley, where it opens up and flows into a broad plain. I remember the voice with great clarity. I was seven, and suddenly I heard a voice, not my mother's or father's, and the voice said to me, 'Don't be afraid, my daughter. You shall find the lost cow.' It was an assured voice, and so calm that it instantly removed the fear from my heart. I sat frozen and watched. The darkness grew thicker. There was no sound, and suddenly the cow emerged from the darkness and came up to me. Ever since then, when I hear the

word *salvation*, I see that brown cow I had lost and who came back to me. That voice addressed me only once, never again. I never told anyone about it. I kept that secret hidden in my heart, and I rejoiced in it. In those years I was afraid of every shadow. In truth, I was prey to fear for many years and only free of it when I reached an advanced age. If I had prayed, prayer would have taught me not to be afraid. But my fate decreed otherwise, if I may say. The lesson came to me many years too late, immersed in many bitter experiences.

In my youth, I had no desire either for prayer or for the Holy Scriptures. The words of prayers that I intoned were not my own. I went to church because my mother forced me. At the age of twelve, I had visions of obscenities in the middle of prayers, which greatly darkened my spirit. Every Sunday I used to pretend to be sick, and as much as my mother hit me, nothing did any good. I was as afraid of church as I was of the village doctor.

Nevertheless, thank God, I didn't cut myself off from the wellsprings of faith. There were moments in my life when I forgot myself, when I sank into filth, when I lost the image of God, but even then I often would fall to my knees and pray. Remember, God, those few moments, because my sins were many, and only Thou, with Thy great mercy, know the soul of Thy handmaiden.

Now, as the proverb says, the water has flowed back into the river, the circle is closed, and I have returned here. The days are full and splendid, and I wander at great length. As long as the window is open and my eyes are awake, loneliness doesn't grieve my soul. Too bad the dead are forbidden to speak. They have something to say, I'm sure.

Once a week blind Chamilio brings me supplies from the village. My needs are now very few – three or four cups of tea, bread, and farmer's cheese. There's plenty of fruit here. I have already tasted the cherries, pure wine.

Chamilio isn't young any longer, but his blind gait is steady. He gropes with his thick staff, and his staff never betrays him. When he bends over, I discover a strong line in his back. They told me that when he was young, the women clung to him. No wonder; he was handsome. Now, see what the years have done to him. First he became deaf and then he went blind and now there are only remnants of him. When he approaches my hut with the bundle on his shoulders, he seems heavy and submissive for some reason, but that's only an illusion.

When I left the village he had just been born, but I heard a lot about him, not always favorable gossip. After years of bachelorhood and wild living, he had married. The bride was pretty and rich and she brought a considerable dowry, but she wasn't faithful. They said that was his punishment because he had deceived so many women, but she too was punished for her infidelities: A swarm of hornets attacked her in the middle of a field and killed her. For once it seemed as though reward and punishment had been meted out in this world, but who am I to judge about that mysterious balance.

Every Thursday, Chamilio comes and brings me my food. God knows how he finds his way. To my mind he's an other-worldly creature. Without him I would be lying in the dust.

'Thank you, Chamilio,' I say loudly. I doubt whether he can hear me. In any case, he makes a small grimace as though driving away a thought. When I put something in his big palm, he bangs on the floor with his thick staff, muttering something, then leaves. His clothes give off the smell of grass and water. He apparently spends most of the day outdoors.

'How are you?' I ask him, and immediately see the stupidity of my question. He does his work quietly and steadily. First he arranges the supplies in the pantry, and then he brings in chopped wood and lays it near the stove, everything done quietly and diligently. For about an hour he works. In that hour

he fills my hut with the aromas of the fields, a perfume lingering with me all week long.

I love to sit and follow him with my gaze as he walks away, a slow departure that sometimes lasts a full hour. First he goes down to the chapel, prostrates himself at the threshold, and prays. Sometimes it seems to me that I can hear his silence. Suddenly, he rouses himself, without fuss, as though turning his back, rises, and walks down to the lake. Near the lake, his strides halt and his feet stop.

Sometimes it seems to me that he tarries in order to inhale the smell of the water. In this season the lake water has a fragrance. He does indeed approach the edge of the lake, bends over, but doesn't linger, and immediately slips down the path and is swallowed among the trees.

When he disappears among the trees, he appears before my eyes again with a different kind of clarity, sturdy and handsome, and I begin to miss him. The darkness makes me forget him all at once, and only on Thursday morning does his warm odor enter my nostrils, and I remember him, and a tremor of expectation runs down my back.

On most days I sit in my armchair, a wooden armchair upholstered with thick cushions. The years have not harmed it; it still takes pity on a person's bones. Here my mother used to sit on Sundays, her eyes shut, all the week's weariness stamped on her face, her hair thin and gray. Now I am forty years older than she was. The tables have turned – the mother is young and the daughter is aged, and that, it seems, is how things will remain for ever. When the dead are reborn, she will certainly be astonished: Is this my daughter, Katerina? Nevertheless, when I pray for my life I also pray to her. I'm certain that our mothers protect us, that without them and their virtues, the wicked would long since have done away with us.

Most of the day I sit and gaze out. Before my eyes the lake

flickers in its brilliant hues. In this season its light is dazzling. Once, abundant life rustled here, and now there is only silence. When I listen to the silence, distant sights rise up from the meadows and fill my eyes. Yesterday, I had a very clear vision. I was three and sitting in the pasture and our shepherd dog, Zimbi, was licking my fingers. Father was sitting under a tree, slowly getting drunk from a bottle of vodka, happy and content. Father, I call out for some reason. He's so immersed in his drinking, he doesn't answer. I sob and cry, but my sobbing doesn't move him from his place. Mother bursts out of the house like a storm wind, and I immediately fall silent.

My mother, of blessed memory, was an unfortunate woman and we all dreaded her, even my sturdy father. Not even the cows dared defy her. I remember how, with her bare hands, she once subdued a crazed cow. Her hands, God forgive me, scar my body till today. She would beat me for everything, serious or trifling, with fury and without mercy. Easter was the only time she wouldn't beat me. At Easter her face would change, and a silent awe came into her eyes, like a fast-flowing river whose waters grow placid. At Easter her face would radiate light throughout the house: a kind of piety that didn't belong to this place.

I would spend Easter on a ledge, next to Zimbi. I treasure Zimbi's memory with pleasant warmth. He was a sturdy dog. He liked people and especially children. If there is any warmth in my body, it is the warmth I absorbed from him. His odor still clings to my nostrils. When I left the house he whimpered bitterly, as though he knew I wouldn't come back to see him. For me, he still lives, especially his barks, restrained barks, that always sounded to me like friendly greetings. My soul cleaved to his, if I may say. Since my return, I sometimes hear his whimpers, and I miss his round, soft body, his silky fur, and the smell of the river that clung to his paws.

My mother also loved Zimbi. But her love was different,

hemmed in, without contact. But that mute creature apparently sensed that this unfortunate woman had a feeling for him, and he would jump toward her with affection. He was deathly frightened of my father. Sometimes I sense that I am tied to my late mother through Zimbi's body. Our love for Zimbi bound our souls together with a hidden force. Only God knows the secrets of the heart, and only God knows what joins us together in life and death.

Right after Easter, the light in her face went out and anger would cloud it again. When I was still little, I heard people say: 'She's very unfortunate. She must be pitied. Her offspring died as infants.' I was certain that the angel of death would not pass over me. Every night I would pray for my life. And, wonder of wonders, the prayers worked, and my life has been prolonged beyond man's allotted span.

My mother died very young. Her face is as clear to me as on the day she left us. I especially see the angry swing of her long arms. Even today, many years later, I remember her with fear and trembling, as the Scriptures say. Every time I think about her, she comes toward me with rage. Why, Mother, I ask, are you angry at me? I have already been punished for my sins, and I shall be whipped for my transgressions in the world of truth. But my mother is obstinate. She is very young, and she will stay young for all eternity. If she had lived as long as I, her blood would have been calmer. At my age, no one gets angry any longer.

Sometimes it seems to me that she bears us all a grudge because we buried her in the ice. The cemetery was barren and white, and the two gravediggers carved out her plot with axes. The people stood at a distance from the pit and shivered. The priest fumed at the gravediggers for their laziness, for not preparing the trench in time. The priest's face was gray, and he urged the gravediggers on with mumbled words that sounded like curses.

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Afterward, in the dark already, the prayers dropped like hail. I wrapped my head in a kerchief to avoid seeing the coffin lowered into the pit on ropes, but the cold penetrated to my bones anyway, and I feel it to this very day.

Right after Mother's death, Father sank into heavy drunkenness. He neglected the house and farm, sold the embroidered cloths and even my mother's dowry chest. Now I became afraid of him, as though he were a stranger. He would return home late at night and immediately collapse onto his bed like a corpse. He slept most of the day, stirring only toward evening, and without delay, he would head for the tavern.

In the spring he didn't go out to the field. He ignored me as though I didn't exist. Sometimes he would brandish his fist at me and slap my face, distractedly, the way one swats a fly. My mother's death freed him to drink as he wanted. Sometimes he would come home in a gay mood, like a wild young man.

One night he approached me, may God forgive me, and spoke to me in a voice that wasn't his: 'Why not sleep with Daddy? The house is cold.' His eyes were glassy, and a kind of wanton redness glowed in them. He had never spoken to me in a voice like that. 'It's good to sleep with Daddy,' he said to me again in the voice that wasn't his. I felt in my heart that this was sinful, but I didn't know for sure. I crawled under the table like a dog and didn't utter a word. Father crouched on his knees and said, 'Why are you running away from me? It's your daddy, not a stranger.' Then he put his two huge hands on my shoulders, pulled me to him, and kissed me. He then got to his feet, made a dismissive gesture, and sank onto his bed, asleep. After that, he didn't look at me again.

A few months after my mother's death, Father brought a new wife home. She was a tall, broad woman who never spoke a word. The mountain from which she came was embodied in her face: a cramped face, like a workhorse's. Father used to talk to her in a loud voice, as though to someone deaf.

'What are you doing?' she would ask me in a frightening tone.

'I?' I recoiled in my great fear.

'You've got to work,' she said. 'You can't sit idle.'

I used to spend most of the day outdoors. Even then I knew that this life would pass away and that another life, different and distant from here, would emerge from it. Every night I used to see my mother in a dream, and she, as always, was busy with housework, debts, and sick cattle. 'Mother!' I wanted to have her near me, but she, as in life, was angry at everyone. I told her that Father had brought home a new wife. She seemed to grasp the fact, but ignored it.

In the autumn, I left the house. 'Where to?' asked my father.

'To work.'

'Be careful, and don't step off the straight and narrow path,' he called, and without adding a word, he disappeared from my sight. My father was a powerful man; he didn't dare strike my mother, but I heard that he used to beat his second wife fiercely. They told me that he changed in the final years of his life and started going to church on Sundays.

I can hear my mother's presence simmering and hissing, but I see my father before me as though he has refused to leave this world. In the summer many years ago, my father once stood leaning on a long pitchfork and smacked his lips to the cows, as if he were blowing kisses to slutty girls. The cows looked at him and smiled, which tickled his fancy, and he kept on smacking his lips. A strange kind of intimacy heated up between him and the cows. That summer, when I was in the third grade, on my way to school I suddenly heard my father's voice: 'Where is she going?'

'To school,' Mother answered without raising her head.

'What good does it do her? They don't learn anything.'

'You're not a priest. The priest ordered us to send the girls to school.'

'I say no.' A spirit of foolishness arose within him.

But my mother wasn't alarmed, and she told him, 'There is a God in heaven and He is king and He is the father, and we are ordered to heed Him, not you.'

Mother was a strong and brave woman. I saw her courage once in the winter, when she fought with a horse thief and made him run for his life. But for some reason she did not bequeath that courage to me. I was afraid of every shadow and listened for every sound; at night, even the crickets would alarm me.

This isolated place gave me no joy, but my first memories are still crystal clear: the rains, for example, the furious rains, or the harrowing rains, as they call them here. For my part, I loved the swift rains of the summer and the mist that used to rise from the meadows after a shower.

I never see my father and my mother together. As if they had never been together. Each of them had a special connection with animals. My mother took care of them devotedly but coldly; a healthy cow didn't count for her. My father, in contrast, had a provocative relation with them, as if they were women to be seduced.

My mother was contemptuous of him for that behavior. After my mother's death, I occasionally used to visit the chapel. She seemed to be lying on the large icon and praying together with the Holy Mother. I used to sit and watch the women praying, forlorn women. Sometimes they would hand me a piece of cake and bless me. There, among the smoky candles, the mildew, and the offerings I learned to observe people.

My father and his new wife did not, apparently, have a happy life. My mother's spirit hovered in every corner. The new wife, the stranger, tried in vain to dislodge her from her domain. More than once I heard her grumble, 'I can't manage to do anything. In my house everybody was pleased with me, and here everything goes wrong.' Father, of course, didn't accept these excuses, and every time bread burned in the oven or the food spoiled, he would hit her. She used to screech and threaten to run home. Years later, I heard that she dished out her fair share too, and when my father got sick, she treated him shabbily. There were rumors that she poisoned him. Who knows? She too is in the world of truth. If she sinned, she'll pay her due. All accounts are settled in the end.

Something else, no small matter, used to be whispered about the house: my father's bastards. Mother, of course, never forgave him, and she would often remind him of his sin. Each time she mentioned it, a peculiar smile would spread over his face, as if it weren't a sin anymore but some trivial lapse. He had two bastards, from the same woman – a notorious harlot. In my childhood, I had seen them with my own eyes: sturdy young men, sitting on a narrow wagon and driving two skinny horses. Their way of perching on the narrow wagon struck me as funny. At a second glance, I discovered they looked like my father. 'Mine die and the bastards live and thrive,' I heard my mother say more than once, gritting her teeth.

I left home with neither pain nor remorse, taking the back