

Who Switched My Country (from *The Hunger Angel* by Herta Muller)

Leo Auberg is 17 years old when he is first deported to a Soviet Labour camp, just as WWII is drawing to a close. He leaves his family in a small Romanian town and has to find a way to survive in the camp. At this point in the novel he has been in the camp for several years with no word from his family back home.

Three nights in a row I was haunted by the same dream. Once again I was riding home through the clouds on a white pig. But this time when I looked down, the land had a different appearance, there was no sea along its edge. And no mountain in the middle, no Carpathians. Only flat land, and not a single village. Nothing but wild oats everywhere, already autumn-yellow.

Who switched my country, I asked.

The hunger angel looked at me from the sky and said: America.

And where is Transylvania, I asked.

He said: In America.

Where did all the people go, I asked.

He said nothing.

On the second night he also refused to tell me where the people had gone, and on the third night as well. And that bothered me the whole next day. Albert Gion sent me straight from our shift to the other men's barrack to see Zither Lommer, who was known for interpreting dreams. He shook thirteen big white beans into my padded cap, turned them out onto the lid of his suitcase, and studied how far apart each bean was from the others. Then he examined their wormholes, dents, and scratches. Between the third and the ninth bean he saw a street, and the seventh was my mother. Number two, four, six and eight were wheels, but small. The vehicle was a baby carriage. A white baby carriage. I said that was impossible, we didn't have our baby carriage anymore, because my father had converted it into a shopping cart as soon as I learned to walk. Zither Lommer asked if the converted baby carriage was white, and showed me on bean number nine how there was even a head inside the carriage, with a blue bonnet, probably a boy. I put my cap back on and asked what else he saw. He said: Nothing else. I had a piece of saved bread in my jacket. He said I

didn't owe him anything since it was my first time. But I think it was because I was so devastated.

I went back to my barrack. I'd learned nothing about Transylvania and America and where the people had gone. Or about myself, either. It was a pity about the beans, I thought, maybe they were just used up from all the dreams here in the camp. But they'd make a good soup.

I'm always telling myself I don't have many feelings. Even when something does affect me I'm only moderately moved. I almost never cry. It's not that I'm stronger than the ones with teary eyes, I'm weaker. They have courage. When all you are is skin and bones, feelings are a brave thing. I'm more of a coward. The difference is minimal, though, I just use my strength not to cry. When I do allow myself a feeling, I take the part that hurts and bandage it up with a story that doesn't cry, that doesn't dwell on homesickness. For instance one about chestnuts and how they smell – even though that really does have to do with homesickness. But I make sure I only think about the Austro-Hungarian chestnuts that Grandfather told me about, the ones that smelled of fresh leather, the ones he shelled and ate before setting off around the globe on the Austrian sailing frigate *Donau*. That way I use homesickness from my grandfather's story to tame my own homesickness here, to make it disappear. So, when I do have a feeling, it's actually a smell. The word-smell from the chestnuts or from the sailor. Over time every word-smell withers and dries out, like Zither Lommer's beans. Of course you can become a monster if you give up crying. The only thing that keeps me from becoming a monster, assuming I haven't turned into one already, is the sentence: I'll know you'll come back.

I taught my homesickness to be dry-eyed a long time ago. Now I'd like it to become ownerless. Then it would no longer see my condition here and wouldn't ask about my family back home. Then my mind would no longer be home to people, only objects. Then I could simply shove them back and forth across the place where it hurts, the way we shove our feet when we dance the Paloma. Objects may be small or large, and some may be too heavy, but they are finite.

If I can manage all this, my homesickness will no longer be susceptible to yearning. It will merely be hunger for home as the place where I once was full.