

# THE FENCE

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translated by

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in collaboration with the author

## TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

"The Fence" is included in the collection of short stories *Περιττή Ομορφιά* (Athens: To Rodakio, 2017). Nasia Dionysiou (b. 1979) studied Law specializing in International Law of Human Rights. She works for the Cyprus Ombudsman. She published short stories in electronic and print journals and collections. *Superfluous Beauty* is her first book.

## THE FENCE

“Calm down”, said the woman as she kept caressing his forehead, “calm down”.

Eventually, he seemed to relax, and then he pulled up, sat on the bed, fixed his gaze on the all-white ceiling. Next, he started talking, hesitantly at first, but more coherently, more confidently as time went by.

“It was at the close of summer, when the first unseasonable snow started falling, and with it the first whispers began sporadically to arrive. Afterwards, the snow became denser, and with the snow the whispers grew denser, too, haphazardly coming from all directions, spreading at the crack of dawn like mildew on the fields.

“They would always begin by saying: *I have nothing against snow*, promptly adding: *But it has to adapt to our own weather conditions* Or: *we are facing an imminent danger of total snowyfication* Or: *why doesn't it just stay in its heaven*, and even: *why doesn't it just return to its heaven once and for all?*

“These whispers did not originate with people of the so-called margins. Our town had isolated those people early on. They would say: *Out with all the snow!* Or: *En marche! Let's shove the snow back to the sea*, Or even that: *the only solution to snowyfication is the heat wave*. The most fanatical among them were already in jail, the loonies in the lunatic asylum. And there was nothing connecting us to them anymore.

“The others, the snowsceptics, as we called them, were different. They were simply concerned citizens. Active members of our society, some family people, some loners, some educated, well-established, others unemployed, a few religious people, a few atheists, some who had just arrived, old, middle-aged, young, women and men. They could disagree on everything else, but on the matter of snow they came to the unanimous conclusion that the snow was incompatible with our meteorological history, a provocation against our climate mores, unable to adjust, that the free movement of clouds harms the trees, the soil, the subsoil, and that, at any rate, multi-weather society imposes upon us foreign customs, it burdens the public purse, it precipitates unpredictable weather developments.

"Of course, there were those who kept the opposite stance discoursing on the contribution of the colour white in composing the exquisite mosaic that was our town. They said that no natural phenomenon is illegal and they demanded open skies.

"Yet another group, on their part, all high and mighty —landowners and industrialists, contractors and technocrats— suggested that we take advantage of the cheap snow, pointing out its positive effects on irrigation, energy, development.

"There were also some, most of us, I guess, who said nothing...

"At first, the disturbance had the force of a tornado, a gale, a hurricane, but soon the forces abated; it was as if they had neutralized one another in their din; something resembling a cloud of dust was all that remained, covering the town from end to end, while the snow kept on, the snow kept on snowing.

"In the meantime, the authorities carried urgent motions to hire new personnel and procure extra military material. The well-manned road-cleaning crews and the new snowploughs were hard at work. Every single snowflake had to be isolated right away, be shrunk, be dissolved.

"But the snow persevered and persevered, and gradually the flakes that had no time to melt —and indeed many failed to melt— joined others of their kind at the circumference of the town. A fence then started taking shape. It grew taller by the day, wider, it started obstructing our view of the horizon, the opposite hills, the highway, it drove the migratory birds away, cut down like a blade the little lilies growing by its side, blocked the warm streams of air, the scents of the fields, the distant echo of the sea.

"Very few people had the courage to get close to the fence; afterwards, they confessed they saw disfigured shapes of predatory birds come to life, with hunchbacks and festering wounds and marble eyes; they swore they heard squawks, blasts, howling.

"Only some children gazed at it insouciantly. They insisted that inside the fence lived other children, who could even be their brothers and sisters, so identical did their faces look, so alike did their voices sound, their drawings, their toys. Therefore, the children never stopped wondering what on earth we had against snowmen, and they continued to gather carrots, colourful buttons and old shawls, building sleighs, shining their skates, and waiting for the snow to spread all over again.

"The rest of us locked ourselves inside. The snow itself was no longer a threat. But the cold emanating from the snowy fence was getting more intense, pierced our bones, paralysed our nerves. Even the slightest drop

of rain made us anxious, we would close the shutters at the lightest gasp of wind, every thunder looked like the beginning of a new cold war.

"The news bulletins provided guidelines for self-protection. The authorities delivered fiery speeches, held plebiscites and signed bilateral agreements, ordered ever pricier systems of defence. We piled sandbags around the houses, bought hot-water bottles, quilts, stoves, stuffed the cracks in the walls. Rarely did we venture out, we were alone in the occasion that we did, heads down and hooded up, as if we were fugitives or wanderers, pepper spray in pocket, glancing furtively around to see if we were being followed. And in the odd occasion we got together, we performed exorcisms, orisons, made vows, we rolled around on other bodies, we cursed, we drank grated ginger. At nights, we smoked thickly-rolled cigarettes, we took pills to fall asleep. But nothing could make us feel warm. The freezing cold united us and swept us away.

"Not the cold; it was the fence; the fence that surrounded us without respite; the fence; our enemy was the fence.

"One day, midday or afternoon, maybe midnight, at the sound of a signal or a code word or nothing, I can't remember, we took whatever we could find —rocks, shovels, mattocks, pickaxes, falchions— and we rushed straight at it, screaming, I can't remember what words exactly, screaming screams of revenge".

Then he started jolting his head, jolting it left and right. His glance fell from the ceiling to the wall, then to the other wall, to the floor, to the bars in the window, back again onto the ceiling, while his forehead dripped, bathed in sweat and the white light of the lamp.

"Afterwards", he went on, "afterwards the bang, the flash, the fence, the fence started falling apart, all was white, from its insides poured out faces, colours, voices, enemies, all of our enemies. It was us. Was it us or was it our brothers, I can't remember... I didn't know... I still don't know. Then, smithereens, our faces, the colours, the voices, white, all white..."

"Calm down... it's over now..." the woman said in a trembling voice, passing her aged hand slowly behind his neck.

"All was white... I can't remember anything else, I don't know, I swear I didn't know... my brother..."

"Calm down..." the woman said to him, leaning his shoulder against her empty chest, which was heaving.

"Here, too, all is white... this room... where am I... where is my brother?"

“Calm down, calm down”, the woman repeated, caressing his hair, “you need to calm down now”, she kept saying wiping his hot forehead, “calm down already, my son”, feeling the sign of the murder on his forehead.

And she kept biting her lips, so that he didn’t get wind of her other son, whose face she herself had washed with rose water, lest she gave him up to Charon, lest she gave him up unkempt, lest she gave him up.

And her voice came out in a long-drawn “my son, my son, my son”, a lullaby and simultaneously a dirge, and then again “my son, my son, my son...”

*Translated in December 2017  
Nicosia, Cyprus and Princeton, New Jersey*