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I Curse the River of Time

Per Petterson
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Arvid Jansen is standing on the precipice of loss. He is losing his mother, who has recently been diagnosed with cancer. His marriage is also dying, as is Communism, which has formed the basis of Arvid's beliefs since he was a young man. In Per Petterson's new novel, *I Curse the River of Time*, the year is 1989 and the Berlin Wall is being dismantled, like so much of Arvid's life.

In an attempt to understand his looming new world, Arvid follows his mother from Oslo to the house in Denmark where he spent his childhood summers, the house in which his mother grew up. Over the course of a few days, Arvid is drenched in memories of his early romance with his wife, of the factory work for which he abandoned his place at the university, of his brothers, one of whom has already died, and of his mother at various stages in her own life.

Fear is the basis of many of his actions and reactions. Mostly, Arvid is afraid of death: "Not of *being* dead, I could not comprehend that, to be nothing was impossible to grasp and therefore really nothing to be scared of, but *dying* itself, that I could comprehend, the very *instant* when you are absolutely sure that *now* comes what you have always feared, and you suddenly realise that every chance to be the person you really *wanted* to be, is gone forever, and the one you were is the one those around you will remember."

Petterson, Norwegian author of several books, including the award-winning *Out Stealing Horses*, offers here a kind of origami novel: time bends and folds around the characters so they are both young and old, healthy and sick, dead and alive. His considerable skill is evident in the clarity with which readers are immersed in each chapter—though we may leap backwards and forwards on the temporal plane, we never stumble or trip.

Wholly realized characters act in ways readers will find familiar. They drink, smoke, mistake old friends for new enemies, and try, in vain, to keep from hurting the people they love the most. Arvid confronts his turning, twisting life and memories in a flawed, helpless manner, as do the best of us when faced with great change and mandatory sacrifice. The final product is something important, lovely, and a bit mysterious.

ANDI DIEHN (July / August 2010)

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