

from:

Homestead

Magnus Dahlström

translated by

Neil Smith

Writer Magnus Dahlström has achieved success as a novelist and dramatist. His latest book is a carefully crafted tale of horror and suspense and has been received with much acclaim in Sweden. The characters form a large cast of people in a rural community and the narrative switches from one to another. At the centre is Majvor, to whom we are introduced at the beginning.

MAJVOR ANDERSSON

I.

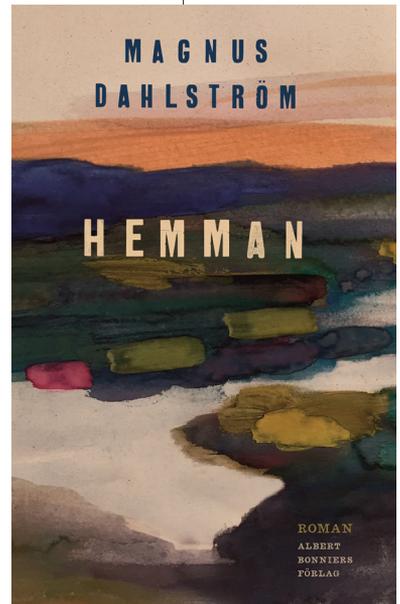
The old wood-fired stove was still there, in the middle of the kitchen. Majvor Andersson looked at the black metal object with her hands on her hips. A cold draught was blowing across the floor. There was a chequered pattern of red and white tiles around the stove, the red tiles now blackened and worn. Ingrained dirt had settled in the cracks and gaps between the tiles, very hard to clean.

It hadn't reached that far.

Then she realised that it had. She could see a dark mark on the stainless steel handle at the top of the stove. There was an oval stain on it, barely visible, like a spatter of sauce that's bubbled over. When she felt the dirty grey surface with her finger it was full of similar black dots, stains and spatters, still shiny, but they'd soon dry. They didn't come from the stove itself, but from the other direction, from the spacious kitchen.

Majvor Andersson examined the floor, letting her eyes glide towards the opening to the living room. She could just make out an upholstered brown leather armchair. The door was open, and part of the shiny parquet floor was visible before a thick, dark green rug covered it. A dark-brown coffee table. The radio. Red spots on the dark-green rug ought to look black, and presumably there were more marks on the floor and the table, and if she was going to get rid of all of them she ought to scrub the floor and wash the rug. Scrub the floor and table and wash the rug – or she could get rid of the rug altogether. Burn it, in the stove.

Through the window she could see a cloudy sky. Part of the tree in the



Hemman.
Albert Bonniers
förlag, 2018

Rights:
Madelene Andersson,
Bonnier Rights,
[Madelene.
Andersson@
bonnierights.se](mailto:Andersson@bonnierights.se)

Dahlström's first book was a collection of four stories, *Papperskorg*, Alba, 1986.

Previous novels published by Bonniers include:
Fyr (Lighthouse), 1987
Hem (Homes), 1996
Spådom (Prophecy), 2011
Sken (Appearance), 2012
Psykodrama (Psychodrama), 2014

The novel *Hem* was reviewed by Marie Allen in SBR 1997:1

corner of the garden. And beyond that a view of sloping farmland.

She could see clear footprints across the kitchen floor, in both directions from where she was standing. She could see footprints out into the hall. Brownish footprints. Damp patches that were slowly drying, after she'd trodden on the spots. She had to limit their spread.

A dark, heavy smell of forest and iron was starting to fill the room. Like a smell of damp moss, manure, stagnant water. A raw, organic smell.

There was a skinned rabbit on the kitchen table. Two brown hens with their throats cut. A pail of innards.

The chalk circle needed to be drawn around the table, over towards the front door. The movement needed to be more precise, more controlled. The animals' blood had sprayed far too far beyond the edge of the circle, in completely the wrong pattern.

Small feathers were still drifting in the air. Now she would have to start again from the beginning.

TORD OLSSON
ERIK OLSSON

II.

The sound of rippling water could be heard in amongst the trees. The temperature was above freezing and the snow had already started to melt further up in the forest, and the ground was partially bare on the side facing the rocks that got warmed by the sun. It had rained heavily the previous day, and the gravel track itself was free of snow. There was still some ice in the ditch. It was dark under the dense branches even though the sky was blue, the middle of the day.

Tord Olsson looked up among the trees. There was no movement there, nothing, as far as the eye could see. If it was a berry-picker, this was completely the wrong season. There were better places to go hiking. The water was trickling in the little stream, and a clear cold wind was whistling through the treetops. There was no birdsong. His feet made faint crunching sounds as he moved.

He turned around. The gravel track wound its way up the hill, towards a junction that couldn't be seen from here. The road actually ran in a wide arc around the entire island, with side-roads leading down to the coast and inland to the scattered houses. For a visitor, a stranger, there weren't many good reasons to take this particular track. For a stranger, there weren't many reasons to park precisely here.

For a brief, unavoidable stop, perhaps.

But twenty-five minutes had passed now.

A small figure in blue clothes and a red woollen hat was moving about on the other side of the track. Running in circles around a stack of logs, timber that hadn't yet been taken away. The wood was marked with yellow bands. The unfamiliar car was parked by the wood, almost invisible, as brown and mottled as the sawn tree-trunks, only its shape seemed to give it away. The short, blue-clad figure ran around the car and disappeared behind the stack of wood, waterproof trousers rustling.

A fresh smell was coming from the damp vegetation. There was no one else around, in any direction, no sign of the car's owner, the person who had stopped and parked here for some unknown reason. He slowly scanned

the trees and rocks.

'Hello!'

The blue-clad figure yelled something unintelligible and disappeared again. Tord Olsson walked backwards across the track.

The child was hiding from him.

So he walked around the abandoned car. Inspected the bodywork. Ran his finger across some large patches of rust in the dark-brown paint. Kicked the front bumper gently. The badge said SAAB, over an emblem of a twin-engined propeller plane. Silver-coloured stainless steel. The curved shape of the vehicle tapered off at the rear. Two doors, both closed, one small dent on the left wing. Signs of rust at the bottom of the bodywork.

He peered in through the windows. The windscreen was split in two by a narrow vertical bar. The side windows reflected his face. Low brown seats, with yellow stripes. The white steering wheel bore the same badge as the front of the car. There were three rectangular gauges on the dashboard. Nothing on the back seat. He felt for the door handle and pushed it down – and the door opened with a click. It wasn't locked: the door swung open on rear-mounted hinges. A creaking sound. Then he noticed the angle of the steering wheel, and a number of signs that someone had been sitting in the driver's seat recently – damp marks on the rubber mat. Damp between the two protruding pedals, dirty snow around the accelerator. An open ashtray. Wool or strands of pale hair shimmering faintly on the backrest. Marks from the windscreen wiper. Dust around the air vent. The padding of the seat looked like it still bore the impression of the driver's back. A particular smell, a smell of something scorched, and petrol. A smell of oil. Tord Olsson had no difficulty recognising the smell of an engine that has recently been running.

The blue-clad figure was swinging a stick around.

The stick hit the car.

He looked around again.

No one.

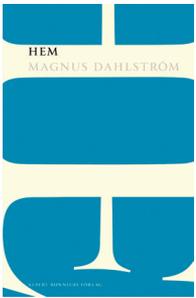
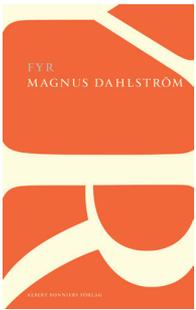
The wind was blowing clouds across the sky and the world around them grew darker.

The car didn't belong to anyone living in the area, he knew that for certain. The closest property was Major Andersson's, down the hill in the hollow, less than a kilometre away. She lived there alone. Forty years ago her husband had collapsed when he was laying new slabs on the path from the mailbox up to the house, crushing his foot with the slab he was carrying at the time. The house wasn't visible from where he was standing. Water was burbling in the ditch, following the slope. The gravel track wound its way down and disappeared among the trees. There were a few patches of snow here and there, but apart from that the ground was bare. The sea was visible through the trees down by the shore.

Oddly there was no sign of footprints on the ground, apart from his own, which suggested that the car had been there since the previous day, when the sleet would have washed them away. The ground was also covered with pieces of bark, pine needles and twigs, feathers too, in places. The earth was packed hard, woven with a network of fine roots, and water had only gathered in a few indentations. His own footprints slowly vanished as he looked at them.

MAGNUS
DAHLSTRÖM





The thin stick tapped the bonnet of the car.

The boy ran back around the stack of wood again and hid once more.

Up in the forest there was a small path leading up to its highest point, over two hundred metres above sea-level. Every so often the idea of completing a marked trail to the top was discussed, in the event of the area ever attracting more visitors, but a stranger was hardly likely to find it. Damp brown undergrowth covered all the rocks, patches of snow glinted. It was impossible to see any trace of the path.

A gust of wind caught at his jacket.

The car door swung open in the wind; he was still holding the handle.

He let go of it instinctively and took a step back. Then he stretched his leg out and nudged the door shut with his foot. The metal clicked dully.

'Let's go.'

He started to walk down the hill towards the hollow, in the direction of Major Andersson's property. It wasn't that far away. The boy followed him.

HEDVIG OLSSON
LISE OLSSON

III.

Tord and the boy had now been gone the better part of the day, since early morning. They were going to check that the meltwater was draining off the road adequately at a critical point, at a bend on the downward slope. She could hear a faint whimpering sound behind her. The part of the road in question ought to be reinforced and strengthened. The child was lying on her back in the wooden cot. A little white cloth rabbit was lying on the pillow next to her. The cot was in the living room, so it was close to her during the day.

'Shhh.'

Mist formed on the windowpane. It vanished as quickly as it appeared.

Hedvig Olsson looked out at the backyard. The whimpering continued.

Rusty iron beams of various lengths, rusty drums, some of them still black, some with big holes right through them, rocks, car tyres, part of an engine that were slowly rusting, rusting car doors, a mass of brownish-black metal components whose paint was flaking off, and in the midst of the mess was a white enamel bathtub, half full of dirty brown water.

Now the child fell asleep.

The cot was indistinctly reflected in the glass in the door leading to the yard. Meltwater was dripping from the roof onto the terrace, turning the planks black, wet, shiny. The smell of cold water and wet wood seemed to seep through the crack around the door.

Soon the whole afternoon would have passed.

A thin crust of snow was still lingering in a few places among the junk in the backyard.

Finally the cot fell silent.

The sound of water dripping from the roof became more noticeable. Hedvig Olsson stood perfectly still and looked at the various objects through the cloudy glass. A black tractor tyre with the remains of a red inner rim, a car door, a heap of short lengths of wood, and beside them the packaging from the fridge that was now standing in the kitchen. There was a freezer too, in the outhouse.

Some birds were calling from far off in the forest.

The sun emerged from behind the clouds, but was partially obscured by the tree-covered slope. She screwed up her eyes.

Now that the child was quiet, all the details seemed much clearer: the ground itself, or rather the grass, where it was still covered by snow. Beneath the snow was a track or path leading to the barn. Now she noticed tracks in the snow through the scrap, and the more she stared, the clearer they became. Black footprints in the white layer of snow, very obvious, evidently recently made.

When had they come back?

The black footprints traced movement from the objects in the yard to the terrace – and now she saw prints on the terrace as well. They were gently dissolving in the water dripping from the roof, but there were more sharply defined footprints right by the door. Immediately below her, on the other side of the glass.

She reached out her hand instinctively and felt the handle, but the door was locked. The handle made a dull metallic sound as it hit the bolt. Then once more.

She slowly turned back towards the interior of the house. The cot, the radio, the sofa, the armchair, the doorway leading to the hall. The front door was hidden from view. And unlocked – whenever anyone was home. It was almost always unlocked at other times too, unless they were away from the house for a while, a few days or so. The nearest neighbours were just under a kilometre away. You hardly ever saw strangers in the area. In summer people occasionally appeared, looking for somewhere to go swimming off the rocks on the other side, and on the rare occasions when anyone was out picking berries in the autumn they were usually people they knew.

The tracks on the terrace slowly disappeared.

The sound of the water dripping from the roof gradually became less regular.

The prints had naturally been made by her husband's boots, maybe even her own. As the snow melted their shape changed and became bigger, unidentifiable.

When the sun came round for a short period in the afternoon the wooden building warmed up, the planks creaking with the change in temperature. The planks needed to be sanded and painted. Some could do with being replaced altogether, after almost a hundred years. Black knotholes appeared through the thin snow.

Cool air was coming from the smooth windowpane.

MAJVOR ANDERSSON

IV.

The floor had been cleaned – and the furniture, the skirting boards, cupboards, kitchen worktop, the walls – and now the whole kitchen smelled of detergent. A grubby line showed how far up the wall she had cleaned, so she had to get the stepladder and wipe the rest of the way up to the ceiling. There had been several splashes on the wall leading to the hall, around the clock that hung above the low cabinet containing the good china. If she looked carefully she could see marks above the doorpost, little black dots on the yellowish wall, but from a distance it was hard to

distinguish new marks from old. Where the patterned, brownish-yellow wallpaper took over the stains vanished into the floral pattern, the marks and spatters hidden by the design.

Every mark was counted, and counted, in the right or wrong place.

The smell of detergent concealed the smell of raw meat.

She emptied the bucket down the sink. The water was deep rust-red, the colour of cooked blueberries. There were a lot of blueberries on her property, up towards the rocks, under the fir trees. The more surfaces she cleaned the more surfaces she needed to clean, so that there weren't any lines to show where she'd been. Ideally the kitchen should look the way it did before she started cleaning. Majvor Andersson stood still for a few moments, looking around and evaluating the situation. Next time she'd have to aim with more precision.

A dog let out a bark in the distance.

Majvor Andersson stared out through the window. Some bare branches were swaying on the birch trees in the garden. The sky was cloudy. The view was misty and dark as the snow melted. The dog belonged to her neighbours, a hundred metres away up the slope. It usually reacted whenever anyone was moving about in the valley, if anyone went down the track between the two properties. Not that that often happened.

She filled the bucket with fresh water.

The clock on the wall ticked. She scrubbed the threshold of the doorway to the living room. The dark green rug was already lying partially submerged in a bowl, but it was doubtful if it would end up clean enough. It really ought to be burned, out in the garden, but the neighbours would notice if she did that. They'd see the smoke, smell it. Perhaps they'd forget. But they would still remember.

The dog barked again.

She heard footsteps on the gravel outside, and a high little voice carried on the wind.

The doorbell rang.

Majvor Andersson went and stood in the hall.

Footsteps on the other side of the front door. The high voice again, then another, deeper voice. A child and an adult. She looked around the gloomy hallway. The floor was clean and dry. It smelled of detergent. The heavy smell of iron was undetectable behind the smell of cleaning products. A peculiar silence reigned inside the house. Her own figure was reflected in the hall mirror: the outfit her great-grandmother had woven and knitted from thick, homespun wool, with brown-black horizontal stripes, with dried grass and feathers around the neck, from a bird of prey. Only her face was visible beneath the hood around her head. Her face looked wrinkled and lined. There was a dull glow in her eyes.

The doorbell rang again.

She saw the axe by the door, cleaned and free of all traces, polished with wire-wool and wiped.

The door-handle was pushed down, then let go. Then there was a sharp knock on the door itself.

TORD OLSSON
ERIK OLSSON

V.

Their surroundings were slipping into bluish-grey afternoon gloom. There wasn't much of a wind blowing off the inlet. Tord Olsson looked down towards the water as he waited for the door to be opened. Majvor Andersson kept a boat down by the jetty, but it had been pulled ashore for winter. She was home, all the signs pointed to that. A curl of smoke was rising from the chimney into the darkening sky. There was a bicycle parked in the drive. On the porch was a pair of black wellington boots, and beside them a broom and shovel. The wooden steps looked like they'd been carefully swept. The boy's blue snowsuit rustled.

There was no sound from inside the house.

He knocked on the door. Tried the handle, but the door was locked. When he looked around the plot he could see signs of his own activity earlier that winter: cleared snow, and some rounds of wood left from when he felled a tree that could have fallen onto the house in a storm.

He waited.

The boy was now standing on the brownish-yellow grass in front of the house. There were still patches of snow in the yard. Water dripped from the roof. The pair of them walked around the corner of the house.

There was a run for hens around the back, a few sticks with net stretched between them. Dark leaves and black twigs stuck up through the thin snow. The ground was wet, muddy, even, in places. But Majvor had never been one for gardening. She could sew a wound together if need be, Tord himself had a scar on top of his head that Majvor had sewn up.

One of the posts had come loose.

He peered in through the living-room window. A stove. Chairs, a table, sofa, armchair, and a wood-framed wireless with an aerial on top of its case.

The door to the kitchen was open, but there was no one there.

The rug was positioned oddly in front of the stove, rolled up, sticking out, perhaps it was drying after being washed.

A rustling sound.

The boy was tugging at the chicken wire.

A shadow moved across the doorway to the kitchen, from one wall to the other. There was evidently someone in the hall. It didn't look like Majvor, though, but someone bigger, dressed from head to toe in dark clothing: brownish-black overalls, with a tightly-fitted hood.

Tord took a step back.

His foot sank into the mud. He had mended the window himself, but that was many years ago now. There wasn't any garden furniture, just a clothes line hanging limply from the wall. There was melting snow on the grass, half invisible, and he thought he could make out footprints in the slush. From feet that were bigger than Majvor's.

The boy tugged at the netting again.

The closest neighbour lived a hundred metres or so away. But if the neighbour was visiting, obviously they would open the door and show themselves. They'd open the door. He knocked on the window with his knuckles. The pane rattled. Majvor might be sick, might not be feeling well. He knocked at the window again, harder this time. It wouldn't take much to break the glass.