

Contemplation of a Picture

That was done very well in the preceding century: voyages of discovery and the reports about them. I'm thinking now about Torell, De Long, Nordenskiöld and above all about the older, but well-known Krusenstern, who traveled around a lot in the North and wrote about the oceans: such wonderful works with volumes of text, atlases, picture portfolios. And I place this picture, which must have come from such a portfolio, in front of me on the table.

A lithograph, colored, a large print in broadsheet. You see a bay, shallow waters with small reefs, boulder formations and piles of stones — gray, reddish, brimstony, green — which lift themselves up out of the water. Behind all this a shore rounded by the effects of the rain, or whole brooks, or a high-

tide; there torn asunder by a ravine, there crashing down, steep, on to a flat sand, but the slopes still high, maybe safe enough, and up there above the slopes and coming close up to them, a village.

You can count sixteen houses in this picture, though there are probably a couple more, and a church is there, all made of wood, and beginning near the church and towards the right, up to the promontory, a kind of cape, behind which the shore then withdraws itself and the open sea becomes visible: crosses, wooden crosses. First a whole group, fourteen or more, then a single one, particularly tall, with a roofing extending from the top to the ends of the arms, lastly once more at greater intervals, farther out towards the sea, four such crosses, these last protected by braces from the force of the wind.

Out on the sea a three-mast bark, perhaps lying there at anchor. In front of it a small sailboat, a fore-and-aft schooner, from its appearance.

Pyatitsa on the south coast of Russian Lapland.

That's what it says underneath the picture, which is framed by four lines, in a so-called contour face print, that is, in letters which are formed only by thin outer lines.

Pyatitsa, a village, sixteen wood houses, a church, many crosses, on the Terskiy coast,

or maybe even past the Varzuga, in Kandalaksha, I don't know. But on the White Sea at any rate, on the Kola peninsula. There are harbors there, ice-free the whole year.

Wood houses. Whoever has lived in such a house can never forget it. You awake, stretch, let your breath go in and out, slowly, still with closed eyes, and sense: the house breathes likewise and stretches, it's as though it wanted to begin to talk and you were waiting for that. And in the winter it seems to close itself around you more tightly, the walls come closer, the roof sinks a bit, tighter around the warmth, nearer about your sleep. And the beautiful walls made of round trunks joined together, on the outside blackened by the tempests and by the sun, smooth, but also already cracked here and there.

Not too close to one another, the houses, but not too widely distant either, here a house, another one, another one, sixteen houses, maybe even more, and the church with a polygonal wooden steeple and rounded tin roof. Then the crosses begin.

The man there very small. He walks past a house and disappears behind it. And now he becomes visible again in the gap up to the next house.

There he goes. He meets a couple of children and stands still. He's called Shōri;

at least that's what the children say. They ask what he's going to do now. Where he's come from, none of them asks.

What sort of man is that?

He erected the crosses, all the crosses we counted before. The fourteen near the church, the one big one standing alone and the others in the direction of the cape. What is that, a cross?

A sign. A remembrance. A recollection. Something which recalls to mind something earlier, something past. Which however is supposed to keep awake the remembrance of this past something — right? In other words, a warning sign too, and not only against forgetting, also against heedlessness. So it must be tall and visible from afar.

We glance over the whole bay and recognize it from here, the single one, and the others too, we can count them.

The man has gone on with the children, past the next house. Shōri, say the children, when are you going to build a cross again? And the man says: Now I'm collecting wood for the fire, help me a little.

Build crosses and kindle fires — so that's what the man does. And why?

We let him go. The children scatter about the houses and behind the wooden fences, and up to the underbrush, which begins near the last houses.

A clear day. It is bright here for months, even at night. The clouds are big and solid, but today very high, the wind has lots of room. And it goes along slowly and heavily under the sky like a large current, without a sound. Not until evening breaks does it get a voice — you don't know from where.

So it's fires this man kindles. Towards evening. And sustains them overnight. Crosses for the day and fires for the night, signs which are visible from afar, warning signs. Only that, or memorial signs too?

A man, who lives alone, but talks with the children and the people, though he doesn't know much in the language they have here — that is to say, he's a stranger. Who however remains here because of the crosses and because of the fires, who has something to do and does it. How long has it been? Ten years or fifteen?

I really think it's been that long.

I mean the shipwreck back then, in the nook, west of the entrance to the bay, which you don't see on the picture. A Swedish or Danish ship it was, a three-master, just like in the picture. On a stormy night, which isn't remembered, in a forgotten year.

Month after month ships pass here, along the reefs stretched out in front and the clear water above the shallow places, past this not undangerous shore.

So the man stayed here, when he saved himself and reached the shore, he alone. And had hunted the dead bodies of the others, on the beach, and buried them, up on the headland and placed the first crosses. Memorial signs.

And then he placed, as near the water as possible, a tall cross, a warning sign, and now more and more crosses are added, along the whole shore, from the cape up to the village. And he has to secure them against the storm. And the ones thrown over he has to set upright. And the wood for this he has to drag here from afar. And on summer nights, when the crosses are only indistinctly recognizable, in the haze, from the direction of the sea, and in the early dusk and the gloomy nights, after the bright months, he lays the fires and lets them blaze until the morning and in the winter all day long, as well.

The crosses I see in this picture, many people then have seen them: the travelers, and then the readers of the Krusensternian and other travel books I'm not familiar with. But I don't know whether these fires are mentioned anywhere, in any report, whether the seamen who come past here, tell about them and are warned by them. As by the crosses.

An act of merit was to be shown here. No mean one, to be sure. It was achieved by a

stranger, who wound up here and didn't go away, because there was something to do here: with fires and crosses.

With which so much else has been done, but who thinks about that.

Take the picture from the table and hang it in front of you on your wall. So that you see it. Memorial sign, warning sign. Both.

