

## One Too Many

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There was no way that the boy could know it—but it was happening all over Europe. The boy only knew that the ice above the village had retreated once again. A new meadow had opened up, and the cows were in clover. The sun shone with increasing warmth, and the boy was happy. His pebbles rattled in his pocket, just as his cows sometimes rattled the loose rocks as they grazed.

He fingered those pebbles, and he thought about the cows. His cows. By now, they were cows that he knew as individuals; cows that meant... that had meant... as much to him, perhaps more, than most people that he knew.

At first they had been just “the cows,” that ambled out to the meadows, always in the same order. But they were no longer just cows! For example, there was the one that he called “Tree.” Every person had a name, but not each cow; but the boy now knew each of these cows, and he had given them his own secret names. The mark on Tree’s forehead looked like a tree, and “Tree” he was. The word, in the boy’s Indo-European language, sounded very much like our own word, “tree.” The largest cow, which invariably led the rest to and from the meadow, was pale and wan; wan was his color, and “Wan” his name.

There was a cow for each and every pebble in the boy’s pocket, but unlike the cows, the pebbles were of course all the same. It was the boy’s father who had insisted on the pebbles: “As each cow leaves, toward the meadow, take a pebble from your mother’s basket. When you are ready to come in from the mountain in the evening, move a pebble to your other pocket, as each cow passes. If every pebble passes, you know that you can come home without a search for a lost cow.”

The boy’s father had vanished that summer, taking his unfinished bow into the mountains to be blessed, but instead (the astrologers said), vanishing to himself become a god.

The boy’s favorite cow was never alone; a “cowardly cow,” that stuck with others; that was why the boy called it “Too.” And there was a cow that required endless nursing; that cow, the boy called “Sick.”

The boy knew that he himself was special. Everyone had know it, ever since his father had become a god. The boy loved spending his days in the mountain meadows, with his cows, thinking about things. He had a lot to think about now: ever since the astrologers had designated him to be the next King. He wondered what he would do, as King, to advance his people in this interesting world.

On this, his last day of caring for the cows, his mind wandered. In the fading sun, as usual, Wan, the largest cow, led the rest past him on the way back toward the village, and the other cows followed in their customary order. Vaguely, the boy thought, “a cow is after all a cow, just as a pebble is a pebble.” But, he named the pebbles as usual, as his mind wandered to his future as King, and to what he might achieve.

Slowly, as the sun set, the cows strolled past, and absently the young King passed the identical pebbles from one pocket to another, saying out loud as he did so, “Wan, Too, Tree, For, Five, Sick, Seben,....”