

Like a Precious Stone

By the middle of the second day, I had reached the edge of the big forest. I stopped and looked back. Never before had I seen the city from a distance. All my life I had spent within its walls, first in the uncle's house, and then in the chapter house with its small enclosed cemetery. Now I found myself on the hill above the vineyard and my feet were sore from walking. The smell of wet timber poured from the wood behind me. The city was but a grey speck from which the spire of the minster protruded like a finger. Never before had I felt so free. In the villages, people had passed me with brief greetings. Nobody bowed their head asking for my benediction.

They did not recognize the prioress clad in the borrowed dress of a maid, and because I was not part of them, they did not judge me. I could have talked to them about last year's harvest, the winter past and an old man's death. Nobody would have wanted to know what I was hiding. The first few days were filled with wonder. The place between the forests seemed full of miracles to me, a glade rather than a valley, a couple of fields, a stream and the lake above. In small clusters, as if the water had washed them there, the women's houses and the garden beyond were spread out around the chapel.

Every morning I crossed the meadows to go to the lake. It was springtime, and the dew seeped into the shoes I had brought from the city. Once I climbed the steep path behind the lake through wild roses and briars. The shoots tore my skirt, my feet slipped on the moist ground. I stopped on a hill to inspect the scratches on my arms. Only then did I raise my eyes - like a canopy blossom arched above me, white on blue canvas. Enchanted, I ran down the hill, and I would not have been surprised had I understood the chant of the birds that morning. In the garden behind the chapel I met Katharina. She listened to me. She knew the old trees, to old to bear fruit any more, and she could not understand my excitement. (p. 7-9)

I recall Katharina's face when I asked to stay with her. Months had passed since my arrival, and yet, every day I expected the letter that would lead me back to the city. It was a damp morning. I worked alone in the garden. The clay stuck to my hoe. The nettles growing between fennel and onions stung my fingers. I noticed Katharina only after she had reached the apple trees. Carefully, she seized one of the branches, feeling for tiny fruit in the faded bloom.

That same night I went to see her. I was tired of being the one who leaves, with whom it is not worth talking about the next winter, next spring, and perhaps I was hoping for the past to fade if I could see a future. I asked Katharina if I could be admitted as one of her women and she smiled... She did not ask what had expelled me from the city and when I tried to explain later, she did not pay attention. My reasons rang petty in the green valley, I had almost forgotten the fear.

For seventeen years, I stayed with Katharina, until I had reached the age of forty. I recall the first summer, the first fall, after that, the years resembled each other. Surreptitiously, the skies shrank above me, and I did not raise my eyes any more. (p. 9-11)

On passing through the gate, I could not help letting my eyes wander over the massive ashlars. Like a stranger, I thought, who ventures into the city for the first time. I did not notice the doubled sentinel on the wall. The streets seemed narrower, the houses alien with their sharp-edged sills and shiny panes. In my memory the colours had been duller. Everywhere, I noticed things forgotten, the names on shop fronts, the carved bear on Ingolt's house. Did they recognize that I was one of them, one who was returning after many years? I recognized their demeanour, their way of walking, and I was tempted to approach them. Did that man in his fur-laced coat not salute me before? They were so similar under their bonnets and caps, now that I was used to different faces.

On the bridge I spotted the minster above the gables. I looked at it, content. All these years had not been able to change its looks. I would never be able to see its stone roses and its friezes unmoved. I would never cross the bridge without remembering that morning when the swans passed over my head with whirring wings. I had been a girl then, and I had thought the white

birds were heralding a happy future. It could not possibly be a coincidence that they appeared the same day as I took my veil. Haughtily, I preserved the memories of the flying swans, and every time I heard the whirring sound in the air, I thought it was meant for me. When I saw the wall of the chapter house at the far end of the square, I faltered. It did not look any different than seventeen years ago, smooth and white, the gate framed with grey sandstone. I had to keep walking before faintness overcame me.

People left the minster in small groups at the end of mass. Amongst them was a woman in a wide coat. With a swinging stride she dragged one foot behind like an injured bird. I remained in the shadow of the gate arch until she had passed. And while I approached the white wall across the cathedral square, I thought of Pia's letter. (p. 21-23)

I study the pointed tracery of the cloister, the slender twisted columns with their blossom of stony leaves. The dusk behind them looks so different, compared to the view through the heavy low arches in front of Katharina's chapel. During the years in the glade between the forests, the city had been far from my thoughts. Sitting in the garden in the evenings, I sometimes remembered with amazement my melancholy on leaving it.

My mind was filled with the green of the valley. The city was reduced to one of those small walled squares behind the hill of Golgatha. From afar, its spires reach proudly into the sky and its standards flap in the breeze while the heathens scorn the saviour on the cross... I had hoped the past would sink into the patient forests with the years, and while there was no forgiveness, I would learn to live with guilt. Like a boulder in the bed of a stream memory would lose its edges in the course of time and shrink into a smooth pebble. Alone in my room, I would occasionally take it out and study it as the object separating me from the others. And each time, it would weigh a little less. (p. 43-44)

(Translated by M. Alioth)