

The Fool

Perhaps he was indeed glad to see me up there. The master did not like me coming down. "Back to your place, fool, back to your place", and I would duck under my hump and climb back to the sill. He did not want me near him. No matter how drunk he was, he always gave me wide berth. The Venetian laughed when I told him about it. "Of course, dear fool, he is afraid of you. Like all masters, he fears the fool, not for his hump like others, but for his songs." "The songs", he added, "are powerful, my friend, more powerful than the masters. They cannot be vanquished." Again and again I have thought about this phrase, the phrase about the powerful song, and yet I did not understand it. It is only now, Marie, after everything that has happened, that I know: It was not a promise by the Venetian, it was a warning - and I did not understand. (p. 14)

Just the very first time, Marie, the first time is that difficult. After that, it gets easier and easier. You will see for yourself when you get out at last and when these walls fade into an outline in your memory. I still remember how I delayed leaving the old man's hut. It was only when I was on the road, when I had walked far enough for the rustling trees and the cries of the birds not to remind me anymore, that I saw the hill in front of me. And only then was I able to believe that I would find a valley beyond. And while I climbed the hills through the trees, it slowly emerged before me with its gentle slopes and the crooked willows by the river. Casually it spread out, green and miraculous, and it seemed to me as if nothing beyond these fields, these hedgerows and bushes could exist while the yellowing dunes I had left behind faded into the mist of my dreams. Only by travelling on and on will you get used to the emergence and the disappearance of woods and meadows, of rivers and villages with their people, and to the possibility of leaving them behind to be elsewhere. You must believe me, Marie, that it is possible; the young mistress went away, the Venetian, too, and so will I, in my own way, when the fire expires. (p. 59-60)

People, however, were put into coloured dresses and given new names by him. The labourer turned into a servant, the maid into a lady-in-waiting, and the upright bard became a hunch-backed fool. Of course, he had to be hunch-backed. Small and hunch-backed, that was how he had seen it in princely courts on his travels, and I bowed to his wishes like everybody else. We took the clothes and the names, I adjusted my hump and sang to order. Had I not wished to sing for a master whose power made me forget my own weakness? Had I not wished to live under the protection of a strong man? In my dreams, I imagined that the splendour of his name, praised in my songs, would reflect on me, and they would not dare to despise me because I was chosen by him - to be his fool. And it was not too hard, Marie, soon I was numb to the pain in my back, except at night in my room when I tried to straighten myself. (p. 62-63)

No. It was not in our power to resist his will; and yet, we were not without guilt. We played the game because he ordained it thus, and though we felt we were deceiving just him in our fancy dresses, in our vanity, we betrayed ourselves. We turned into pawns on his board and we were proud of it. Who would have compelled the master to see the stone slabs behind the gold embroidered wall-hangings, the people underneath the velvet clothes, at the price of one's own soft gambeson? A large fire roared through this chimney in those days, and the plates in the kitchen were full to the brim. Who would have dropped his spoon then, because he failed to comprehend the master's command? They stopped to talk about it and after a while they ceased wondering, too. People tend to forget too quickly, Marie, they forget everything unless reminded by pain. I am telling you, some months later you could have asked them and they would have sworn that the fool was born with a hump. Even those who knew me as a boy, as a young man, as my father's son, even they would have claimed I was another, a hunchback of doubtful origin whom God must have given a voice to make it up to him. And they were right, Marie. Fools have no fathers. The only son of the famous bard who spent his last days in a cabin on the beach had been a well-shaped boy of upright posture, handsome like his mother and devoted to his father as befits an heir. (p. 66-67)

My simple mind induced me to ask, did he miss familiar things from the past, having lived among strangers for so long? And he smiled, Marie, with more contempt, perhaps, than usual, and he

brushed the question away with his hand. I understood then, there was no return for him, either, like for all those who left, and maybe that was the bond between us. There is no return, Marie, as time leaves nothing undisturbed and we cannot recover the places we carry around in our memory. Those who neglect the hearth may not complain when the fire dies and those who remain shall not believe that they can still leave tomorrow. (p. 81)

That night, Marie, the hall suddenly seemed further below, as if the floor carrying the others had sunk deeper in that one night I had spent in the dead woman's room. For the first time, I saw people from a distance and I understood that they were as alien to me as the stars in the sky. Of old, I had wished to belong to them, to the labourers, the traders, the foreigners and, to the enemies even. I wished to be one of them, one of many, unrecognizable and invulnerable in the guise of similarity, and I went forth to find those in whose midst I would not be recognized. I thought then that there had to be a place where I, too, would be welcome, as if they had known me forever, and I would join them at the fireside. And yet, wherever I went, they made me a fool of me. (p. 125)

Of course, it was a betrayal, Marie, the fool's betrayal. He who sees through people while he makes them laugh, who spots their lies and will not be misled by their disguise. It is a betrayal because he lives among them, apart, and because he knows what they want to ignore. Too different to gain their trust, the fool is too similar not to understand them. Neither friend nor foe, he remains a hunchback who cannot cease to remind people of their weakness. And since they cannot kill us without losing face, they will lock us up when they cannot bear our sight anymore. (p. 181)

Translated by M. Alioth