

To Be Blessed in a Foreign Language

When an Outsider travels amongst tradition, speech wilts on tongues - a silence that boils his bones into transparency, this man clings onto his luggage like a storm tossed survivor to a ballast. He turns his taut gaze onto the fields running by. He notices that nothing in this land is welcome to him. The rows of saplings stretch their legs into the distance and turn away from view. The sun lays heavily on the orchard's hips, and beats the breath back into his mouth. Stifled, he filters the antagonism of locals. The wheels underneath him string the road into an eternity of signs- signs to buy, signs of humanity, and a few final signs to turn back. All that is left for him is to rummage in the pockets of a coat the color of dry dirt and pull out several crumpled testaments to loss of memory. That is when the Stranger reads into his aloneness and revels in it. The train ticket, bought in the spur of the moment, a yearning to escape, a napkin of equal part phone numbers and coffee cake crumbs, and numerous taxes on his morals- the cost of bourbon and letters of immediate action.

Since the Stranger expected his universe to be smaller, he arrived late. For him, time keeping became distance only when approaching a destination. He'd never known when to stop, his life was made up of final destinations. Maps mocked his hesitancy in their borders, the city, just like the transit, spat him out onto society crudely. The men with leather hands stare into his eyes. They don't understand his pipework limbs and silver buckle suitcase. He is built like a spoon. His spine curves inwards and his face is moon-round. The inns he wanders into are seedy, half-empty with the dregs of society clinging to consciousness with the ragged nails of desperation. The rooms are all occupied by ghosts; he shouldn't have come without a reservation they tell him. The man translates this into moderate hostility and catches the first bus into the mountains. The locals revel in the distance he puts between their homes. He is the splinter in the edge of their gaze, when the warmth of mid-autumn wanes, they expect him to disappear with the leaves. But the strange man sets up a telescope in the attic of an old cottage ten miles away. He watches the constellations dance and then sleeps well into the evenings. He buys stock in tea and potatoes from the locals, and disappears from the city again. The Stranger cares nothing for the acceptance of these burly children of the earth. He studies the sky, because it is infinite, and the sky observes his ephemerality. Winter creeps into his cabin in subtle notes of Orion, and

darkened hours. The locals begin to doubt the temporariness of this intrusion on their hospitality. They gave him their mountains, and the pine forests crowning them like arrows. What more did he want? He picked at the seams of their culture, asking where they hid the musty garments of their folklore. They tossed him stories to sow into the fallow emptiness of his days.

They began sprouting with the molting of the land. Everything but the pines bleached like bones, when a snow storm licked the earth up. The roads and houses were erased from view. The cabin held him like a beating heart in an empty cage of ribs. The strange man and his telescope, tea, and potatoes for at least another month- he kept his loneliness like incense, to cloy his senses and seep into the inner lining of his gut. Even the telescope was soon whitewashed by the blizzard. The Stranger now knew why these people had fifty words for snow; a name for every pale face of winter, a name for every day in white. The villagers began to worry for their foster traveler. Without his stars he was an orphan.

The Stranger himself was searching for his origins. The myths became more than just spoon-fed revelations of life's hardships. He saw in them the heavy lipped elders with their drooping warnings. He felt admonished and mistranslated it into concern. He was alone in their mountains. Nobody was searching for him in the crevices of winter's jaw. And then there was silence. The silence crawled his skin from bone and left him raw. This kind of stillness quells the heart.

"Hello" The Stranger waits a while.

"Hello."

"Who are you?"

"Who are you?"

"A Stranger."

"Strange."

"The way we're meeting?"

"Meeting."

'And yet he understands, this new arrival' the Stranger thinks. He listens to the walls exhale, and walks into another room. He doesn't speak to his acquaintance later in the evening. The Stranger knows words scuff at the thin film of propriety in an empty room. He soaks his stories in his tea to ward off senescence.

“Might I ask...” The Stranger begins.

“Ask”

“Why did you come here?”

“Here?”

“This cabin, my cabin, in the middle of winter”

“Winter”

“Ah, yes. I love to travel with the seasons too”

“To?”

“It’s the stillness in movement that I pursue, regardless of a destination. It’s so time won’t catch up to me”

“Catch up to me”

“We’re at the same place now aren’t we?”

“Oui”

“I didn’t know you spoke French. Do you know any stories?”

“Stories?”

“Like legends. We could share”

“Share”

And the Stranger paints the cabin into delicate tints of olden forests, the kind that gave everything to the villagers, and then took it all away along with their children. The room was silent except for his voice. The cold wind sometimes tapped on the windows as if to urge the Stranger to continue. His voice stuck to his teeth like honey. The moon crept in to the sky like a drowsy child and hummed with light.

“Did you like it?”

“I liked it.”

“Do you want another?”

“Another.”

And the days rolled off their shoulders like warm spring rains, like tears of condensation from the kettle. They began to feel the universe lowering itself like a blanket of fog over their cabin. They could dream away the year and feel no less stranded than two friends reciting aloud memories. The Stranger told his newfound companion about the legend of Silver Hoof-a goat

that left behind gems each time it struck the ground with its front leg. The characteristic quiet was appealing. It meant someone was listening.

“In the end, the man found his home covered with gems.” The Stranger sat with his eyes closed when the cold bit at his lashes. “But while he was gathering the treasure, his daughter’s cat ran away with the goat as a sort of payment.”

“Payment for what?”

“For the gems. For a miracle in the middle of a harsh winter. For companionship in those months of loneliness.”

“What will I pay for your companionship in these months of loneliness?”

The Stranger chewed on his lip before opening one eye and answering “I do not know yet”

“Not yet?”

“No.”

And the Stranger looked sadly outside for the first time that day, or was it this week? Sometimes he thought that years slipped out of his cabin through the chimney. He imagined they ran naked in the forests singing hymns and scaring locals.

“Do you ever feel as if you forgot something important when you were born?” The Stranger asks. “As if there was a secret you misplaced in your youth along with all those puzzle pieces, and the companions to your other glove or sock. As if there is something we shed along with our childhood?”

The prolonged silence uncovered a song of a forest thing; the sound curled into steam and wove into their hair. They knew something outside was dying with a sound as elegant as a crackling polyphone.

“Happiness.”

And the stranger couldn’t tell if the voice was his or someone else’s.