

The Silent One

In the beginning was absence. To say nothing, to not be. Nothing but a thing they put to use. That they abuse until its insides break.

I saw everything. Don't ask me what. Words lost will be lost forever. It'd be necessary to invent in order to do it well, to say everything that goes through my head. Words to laugh, to forget words, words to act as if. Who still pays any attention to details?

The ocean is blue. There is a boat placed upon it. So heavy that it looks like it will never be seaworthy. It is. White magic. It moves, even.

(The ocean is visible in the distance. Nothing exceptional, really. Because of the sun, the girl scrunches her eyebrows tight, sits down on her heels and describes at short length.)

I no longer know the country's name. I was too young when they came to take me. The woman who rocked me in her arms, she, too, I have forgotten. Only the voice remains, hoarse, the voice of a crazed sky. When night falls, I recognize the enormous trees surrounding the village from which heavy oblong fruits hang like human bodies. They are called spirit-huts because the souls of the dead are locked up within them. Not in all of them. Only those that are living.

In this country dangling like a dream, I hear the river descending, growing. Taking by force the earth, men and animals. Nothing withstands it. In the sky, birds fly by. They look like the handkerchiefs women wear during times of celebration. Down below, the children take aim, scream with joy when the prey falls. Under the generous sun, I watch the kids carry on until a voice tells them to behave. The huts are shuttered. Inside, sleep enters, stinging the eyes like a red ant.

At home, the men don't know what cry means, their tongues have never formed the word. They are accustomed to many others, scores of them: eat, dance, cook, hunt, fish, farm.

At home, the women are always happy. Regardless of what they're doing, they hold a song in their mouth that they suck on endlessly like a piece of candy. Sometimes, late at night, the song refuses to melt away. Runs through their heads until morning. It's always the same story that dances on their lips. The same actions that repeat themselves. Eat, dance, cook...

In the hut where I was born, there is an old woman fast asleep. It's as if she has always been there, just like that, as if her many years, over a hundred in all, allow her to scan the sky and to see in the stars what tomorrow will bring. She usually announces lightning or rain. Sometimes wars, but no one believes her then. Where we live, that cruel word doesn't exist. Nor does gun, ship's hold, master or ocean.

Like my people, I am short in size. A relationship with the sun so large in the sky that it shrivels our bodies. In my village, adults resemble children. Only our faces reveal age. The oldest of our elderly have wrinkles, cotton on their head and blue in their eyes. The oldest of our elderly, on certain nights, get up. Walking stick in hand, they go into the forest. Some say that death is hiding there—the hyena that runs so fast, it enters into our dreams. No one but the trees has ever seen it. But the people no longer know how to listen.

I was too young to learn, too small to climb into the branches, to remember my way around those huts where those that aren't dead keep watch. I didn't know anything about the world when they took me. Because I didn't know what it meant to cry, I yelled when I saw the water falling. So much water under my eyelids, how was it possible? I looked at the sky, observed the clouds. In vain. I looked for the river. Scoured the countryside. Nothing. It was in my body that it had begun to rain. In my eyes, wide open, the river was running, carrying me far from the village, into this ocean where it came each day and disappeared without a trace. Without a mouth to name them, the words fell. Joy, smile, childhood, grasshoppers, baobabs... They drowned the words without saying a thing. It was only a long time later that I realized what had happened. When nothing was left, I opened my mouth. Emptiness. Silence.

One night, they butchered my belly. The man was alone but it was as if there were a hundred of them. I didn't have a tear left when he came in. I was thinking only of my finger in my throat. This finger that would never suffice to get everything out. I thought it would be necessary to put two fingers in, a hand, an arm. Until all of the man's water left. He never came back for more, since he must have known about my finger.

Now I feel sick when I look at my hand. My legs began to feel wobbly. I bleed, clench my fists and force myself to think of something beautiful.

On the path to oblivion, those that cry out resemble us. Dark skin, frizzy hair, the same feet accustomed to darkness. No one knows where they come from, some pretend that they are from here. How is that believable? How could you think the impossible? So as not to founder in madness, there are some of us that assert the opposite. That these Negroes are not real, that they are Whites who in order to beguile us take on our likeness. White magic.

Today, a man collapsed to the ground. His eyes yellow, his ribs bulging. From his lips oozes a whitish liquid. It looks like spume. It's foaming. Like a fish about to die. The time for prayer is past, a hand seizes a stick. Strikes before breaking the chains that link the body to the rest of the group. Without a word, without looking back, we advance. Understanding that only when we are dead will we be free. Unconditionally.

I no longer know the date. Nor the place. As a result, we'll just say it was any old day.

Any ordinary African village tucked in between woods and water. Having arrived the day before with a small group of ten (five of us had perished during the long trek on foot), I was just as soon sold. In a hurry to lift anchor after many long idle months, my new masters had set the price. Everything happened very quickly, the hot iron on the skin, the descent, the cry from the ship's hold when the boat set sail. An hour went by, an entire night. A whole lifetime, some might say, such was the certainty with which we felt that we would end our days there, pitched back and forth by the waves. Forgotten, forgetful of what we had been.

Identify them as you see best, I no longer remember their names. Much less their faces, turned toward the ocean, that laughed out, at last, in confronting it. I, too, was laughing.

I have.

I.

We have jumped.

Together. We have.

Jumped. Ocean. Jump!

We.

have done it.

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