

Tartaglia
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Book Jacket

A quiet story about transformation, about falling silent, about love-moments and death: Herculine travels through continents, countries, villages, and landscapes, taking pictures of carnivals and masquerades. Tartaglia, the Stutterer, stays in his room at his desk. In the room next to the woodstove: stacks of books - the complete works of Goethe, which serve him well for making fires on winter days. Instead of going out into the world, he traverses swaths of linguistic land and maps out inner worlds. Then, one February morning, Tartaglia is gone...

1.

He called me Herculine. Because I am, according to others, a man, but according to my sentiments a woman, and this too on the outside, and so to the world I am a cherub gone astray, a faun whirring through uncertainty, incubus, as he said. Also how I loved him as a woman and not as a man, since I always perceived him as different, yet he loved me neither as a woman nor as a man, but as an ungraspable closeness. Herculine - he called me by this name, ever since I'd given him the memoirs of Herculine Barbin, who took her own life because she was an outlandish hybrid, a satyr, a water nymph, who fell through the cracks and could only find her place in the negation of another, in death.

2.

The Arabian scholars, when they speak of death, seem to use the wonderful expression "this certain body". I sometimes catch myself imagining his body in varying stages of decay. At first his tender corpse, the bluish web of veins, a wickerwork, and the blisters on his skin, autodigestion, becoming infested and maggots and decomposing bit by bit, the shedding of teeth and hair, and finally something nameless. For me, this certain body, that is to say his body in a state of decay, has become a synonym for death. I imagine death's slaughter to be like a masquerade.

3.

To lick the whiteness of speech from the walls, dissolving it with saliva and gently licking it off and swallowing it, swallowing into the day with its shadows, its plants, and suckling with incessant lust, without falling prey to a stubborn pang, to melancholy, impalpable and sudden and without breaking off, he said, that, and that alone, is what there is talk of in silence. Tasting a drop of syrup, as he said, in these images, for me vague, yet for him a precision in his most personal imagination, so that I never disagreed. How I only now realize that only ever in his own language did he contemplate things, feel them over with his words, fields, foreign, often groping outward beyond the limits of understanding, only guessable for me in their meanings, and even more so for others who weren't used to such things, a game to prevent the occurrence of mouth-death, as he said, no sticky-mouth, so the syrup doesn't instantly congeal, stick to the teeth, the lips, the rim of the tongue, and become a trap. One must lick with lust, endlessly, and layer it on the inside and turn pale from it, a saliva licker, pale and paler yet still layering all the same, so as to reach some sort of end, he said, but be never soundless, always have voice.

4.

I'm writing myself away from death. I, who have never written, who never could write, a word, because I always wanted to get closer to things, because I never could tolerate the estrangement of language, because getting closer to the world with language always meant distancing myself from it, breaking off and disintegrating, which was why I always sought avenues through pictures, which were to me more palpable. But now I'm writing myself away from death, because right now that estrangement (poetic displacement, as he said) has become a necessity. The picture doesn't work here. For one, it's been weeks since I've picked up or even looked at the camera, but I could always sense its presence in the room, and thus laid it in the old trunk in the cellar, closed it, locked it tight, so I won't run into it, because taking pictures all of a sudden seems wrong to me. Thus, an experiment with words, not to bring myself closer to the world, but to distance myself from it, in writing.

5.

He said: I thrust the sounds out in front of me, instead of articulating them. I swallow the sounds only to attune and not to chew. I am a speech-stump, he said, a surge-stammerer and speechless. He often spoke of this, in surges. He claimed he was suffering, and I laughed and he laughed too and soon fell silent again and began anew. Yet how little common ground we found in such moments. Because he had no desire for me, because speech always took all his desires away, because he didn't lust after me and didn't want to be lusted after, because he couldn't feel me inside of him in such moments and by no means wanted to feel himself inside of me, since he couldn't feel speech, always just said to me, he felt overflowing and empty at once, and I wasn't allowed to even touch him in such moments, because being touched constricted him, made him lifeless. He said: I lost my skinlessness at my desk. Skinlessness, he said, the act of loving was taking his skin, making him defenseless, abandoned and speechless, speechless in another way, and everything was slipping all the way through to his core, into an inner room, uninhibited, yet at the same time into a complete through-and-through, into a placelessness.

6.

Here in the room next to the woodstove: stacks of books -the complete works of Goethe, which served him well for making fires on those winter mornings, when he slipped through the room, naked, quiet, so as not to wake me, but with an inevitable sound like the creaking of a ship's hull, as he said. But I always watched him secretly through narrowly opened eyes, almond eyes, as he said. The ritual, how he tore a few pages from the volumes and so on, how he ended up crouching naked before the hearth, the tiny hairs on his skin would stand on end and his manhood would grow small from the cold, while I could read the triumph, the roguishness, in his face as he watched the crumbling of the burning pages.

7.

A few pictures here on the table: Cajamarca, for instance, the both of us embracing at the carnival. An overly cute picture, he said not too long ago, a cloud-castle picture, a bogus picture of mine, so he said, even though it wasn't even I who took it, but a passerby. We looked happy, he said, which was a lie, we had been terribly unhappy, because he couldn't stand the fanfare, the frenzy, and I couldn't stand his not standing it, because neither could stand the unhappiness of either, because he remained silent and I danced and hollered. In the picture we look happy. And we were. His mouth is open wide, he rarely laughed like that, and his eyes are clamped shut. He said: I'm your feast. Being your feast means everything to me. Why do you need all of this?

8.

To only have sucking sounds in one's ears when roaming through the streets, as he said, frantic confectionaries that would whet his appetite, even when it wasn't communicable, like a language fallen from its nest, fruitless, he said, yet still this desire inside up to the skin, to holler it into the streets, to release it. Indeed it was a shivering, a churning through the word-grinder and the feeling-grinder, but it really whet the appetite. Though he never did it, since he was always quiet when he walked. At times however, when he believed himself alone, at home, then I heard it, his Helau, gibberish, and there was an inexpressible carnival revelry in me, too.

9.

I called him Tartaglia, Stutterer. We saw a Venetian masquerade. Therein the scene: Tartaglia, the messenger, in the process of delivering a message from the beloved, falters in the middle of a sentence, stammers, is left hanging between words, the sequence of sounds, a mess of syllables, loses itself, struggles in attempts, grimaces, and tongue twisters, but he can't finish the sentence, such that the lover grows desperate, since they both want to force it out, maybe with bitter essences, until Arlecchino, the lover, runs headfirst into his stomach, such that the word reveals itself in a scream.

10.

My carnival, I said. That was exclusively what I did for years: I took pictures of carnivals, masquerades, upside-down worlds. But since his death I only take pictures of corpse-faces, death-masks. My carnival has turned itself upside-down, the crude round dance has become a death-stare.

11.

A snapshot on the divan. He's sleeping, with his head hanging off over the edge on the floor, his dark body on the red material, a fragile and intoxicating thing at once, and I start feeling cold when I see it this way, like dead, and in the camera-flare the silhouette of me as I stand there, somewhat off to the side in an open kimono, and take this picture, and again the feeling of being shut out, on the other side, (nice picture with picture-ends he said), how all-in-all I can only just bear it, to have photographed him at all, since now I always stand on the outside and look down at the pictures, the more beautiful they are, the more beautiful he looks, the more unbearable, and I can't find my way into the pictures, can lick at them with lust, but can't go inside.

12.

The experience of losing a beloved person means, I read, incorporating that same person into oneself, having them continue on in oneself, letting their essences fuse with one's own and, in this sorcery-like ritual, perpetuating that person as well as the love for them, harboring them within oneself. In this way, in its flight into the self, love has spared itself from elimination, I read and am completely at a loss.

13.

Every morning the same ritual: I get out of bed, naked at first, then put on the Arlequin mask or more often the Columbina one, position myself in front of the mirror, and begin my dance, my poses, my antics, my contorted maneuvers, my bizarre ballet, stalk the mirror, laugh at it and taunt it, pursue my joke with it, attempt to challenge it, in a great hilarity that vents itself in the most exaggerated of grimaces, so that I grow tired and lay myself down on the floor, panting, until I catch my breath again, and then begin to perceive myself at last, as the numbness subsides, so that I can sit down at the desk, can begin to write.

14.

I traveled, at regular intervals and over all the years again and again, without destination, but with the camera about my neck, through continents, countries, villages, landscapes, in search of my pictures. Of a sort of laughter that makes those who hear it helpless, naked, and exposed. Or of a kind of shroud that all of a sudden turns the long-concealed inside-out, lets it burst outward and take up space. Or else of an absurd scream, with which the one who creates it breaks through a barrier and thereafter, unexpectedly, finds himself thrown into a freedom. In short: a search for cliff-moments, transgressions, metamorphoses.

I took pictures of mouths torn open, of the painted, the masked, of sick, furious, ecstatic bodies, of crowds, of shady parades and scenery torn to shreds.

But he stayed behind, in his room, at his desk, and, as he said, instead of going out into the world, he would traverse swaths of linguistic land, mapping out inner worlds.

15.

In one of his final letters: I want, I want, but I don't have power over language in order to do. On the contrary, language prevails over me. Relentless, this perishing, he wrote. The more often I recite the lines, the greater the rage. His pain was always histrionic. It wanted to be celebrated. It was a mime, language, I read, a story-book hero, the favorite of the audience, but antagonistic towards him, it laughed about him at the top of its lungs. And as I read this aloud, it overwhelms me, and I must laugh out loud myself.

16.

To bite the green of these eyes out of the grass, he said, suck the juice from the blades and swallow, so that maybe I begin to comprehend my desire, or feel yourself all over in search of clues, feeling, this body, to know what it is that makes me amazing, makes me a mooncalf, and also leads me to language, since the unspeakable desire and the eye-green, he said, since these things are indeed the furthest things from words, are nothing more than life and body, but because of just this, always having to carry the shaft, that is to say this certain pain, in oneself.

17.

I know now that it was shame. He left because he could not bear the disfiguration of his sick body before me. Being turned inside-out, and the nakedness. But couldn't it really have just been shocking ugliness? Couldn't there have been, even in the stench of that overgrown tangle of intimacy, just one moment of beauty?

18.

I rummage through the papers like through animal entrails, in heaps, everywhere the heaps, his stacks of paper, maculation, his rejected pieces, which just came in waves and then hoarded themselves in certain spots, points of accumulation, like in the corners, behind the door, on the tables and chairs, amassed in heaps and eventually collapsed, strewing themselves, fluttering, in all directions and covering everything with their white and their words, such that at first I barely made it through the room, because I was headstrong, derisive, and kicking everything with my feet without shame, and thinking that this way I tempted him, challenged, that I could startle him, make him angry, but then paused, as he just smiled and slunk deliberately about in the midst of the page-leaves, listening to every step, and whispered to me: Like in autumn, through the leaves. You hear it?

19.

In one of his texts, the words, threatening to me: "Our tick-unrest." I indicated to him that I didn't understand. He said: And I don't want you to understand, I want you to give yourself over to the not-understanding, fluttering, the impossible space between, and to no longer be able to even conceive of the things you once claimed to understand, to no longer know anything at all, in the moment when you speak aloud, when you listen in, because it is undefined, but not unvoiced, and I want this to be a liberation for you, a gasp of relief, and I want us together to wear the jester's hat and to feel the rattling and the rift all too clearly and the boundary evermore.

I'm at your carnival, he wrote, for my death-dance. He had disappeared, unannounced, without warning, without a word (what word should it have been, besides?), and, of this I was certain, with no possibility of returning. It would have been an easy matter, to trace him: the stamps, the time of year, allusions, subtle clues. But the thought had to be perished.

He was gone and yet, I knew, close, because he had gone, no doubt a sign of his love, to that place that I had once mentioned, in his presence, as the next one in the world for me. I was sure now, he had delivered himself, maybe in hopes of dissolving in it, unto the carnival de rua, that street carnival of Rio, which took place away from all the masses, away from the demented hordes of visitors, parades, and samba dancers, away in the shantytowns, the destitute quarters of suburbia, in Bonsucesso, perhaps, or in Bras de Pina, there, where the starving and the have-nothings find their costumes in the mountains of garbage, where the bloco da lama, the mud-hordes, revel, tossing themselves in the slime of the mangrove forests, then dancing through the streets, where the inhabitants, in an ancient ritual, bombard each other with mud, talcum, flour, with vinegar, ink, and urine-filled bags, where the frenzy swells into ecstasy and makes the suffering forgotten. He had gone there, to emphasize, to live out, to exhaust his fantasia, that magical masquerade, that carnival self that lives in everyone, even the most disenchanting, that no longer playful, now more obsessive transformation into something else, something alien, that lurks within.

21.

In one of the drawers of the desk I found a crumpled page, with one of his poems on it. It was years ago, at our first meeting in a downtown Cafe, when I, bashfully, asked him the question, just what makes one sad at a carnival, and immediately, as though he'd already been waiting for this question, he pulled the sheet from his bag and read it aloud to me.

22.

The love-moment obliterates my sense of time, he said, bodily dizziness, and the time-pigments, which slide out through my skin and leave me behind, pale, as he said, but death reinstates them, I didn't know what he was talking about, because the love-hours were almost always tangible for me.

But with the news of his dying came a new texture of time, raw, gaping, before as much as after. It seized my bewildered body, marked it with an engraving pen. Just as time used to be mine, it now lies outside of me, foreign. His death obliterates my sense of time.

23.

You and your mummery, he said to me, lovingly, with a saucy smile, perky lips, you and your jesters, buffoons, antics, you and your cabinets of puppets, coquetries, your skylarking eyes, you and your harlequins, your clowneries, tom-tom-drumming, your jest, your fanfare, your shenanigans in single-file. You and your racketing, he said. Just what about that is supposed to be political?

And I, offended, with burning cheeks, told him, probably too loudly, while I stormed up and down the room, about the provocation, the counterculture, the parody of the high-and-mighty, the questioning of authority, the mockery of all dogmas, the openness, the merry anarchy, and the jovial overthrow of the world, until my voice cracked and I looked up and realized that he was lying there, suddenly naked, and indicating to me that he wanted me, there and then.

24.

I go around in circles and recite his letters. Clam-like, he wrote, without breathing, but I still try to suck the salt from the water, because it so badly brings us to mind, bitter, the crustacean-mouth, he wrote. And I read this final passage most of all, always starting over again, which is unclear in its motives, split, because it speaks of farewells, yet at the same time reveals to me the innermost, makes his wordless departure bearable, brings him close: I'm at your carnival, he wrote, for my death-dance (danse macabre), ungainly, because I sense a dwindling away in all movements, a crab-walk, a retrogression. But still: I dance here for you, naked, in the midst of your masks.

25.

My favorite photo in front of me, but, since I always carried it around with me, his face, which was sharply defined, clear, was beautiful, is now yellowed, crumpled, distorted, and I must always think: His picture has wasted away on my body.

It's these very signs, the atrophy in every one of the pictures, through the paper, that mimics, parodies, the decay of flesh, because one wants to hold on tight, but in no way can, and instead a death occurs, in the momentary click of the camera trigger.

26.

To exhale this sigh of love once and for all, to finally put an end to the whirl of words, to accept the impossibility of the word of love, because it is plainly the lonely word, the misunderstood word, he said, to put a stop to this pain and to act out a silent film with facial expressions, a Chaplinesque scene, to discard the words in favor of a silent touching and to thereby reveal everything, through this silence, he said, it is a most internal picture, buried in flesh beneath skin. A breach in the dam, as he said, a destruction of the berth of language and as a result an unspeakable tenderness.

27.

His last letter: Repulsive, porous is my body. I'm trickling out of myself, so that everything is emptied completely, drained, this body, and most especially the mouth, because mouth-decay is the most torturous of all, because I can no longer say anything, write anything like cuckoo flower, and my thoughts are soft like plums, boneless, and I am utterly robbed, so he wrote. And I know now that the sugarcoating won't end with this letter either, that his linguistic facade won't fracture here either, that syrup still drips from his mouth as before and sticks to me all over.

28.

To desire the mouth, and thus language itself, for kissing, for licking, tongue-games, basically grasping the mouth by the lips that form it, as they form the language and the kisses too, and, in speaking, sensing a pre-taste in the touch of the lips, and, in kissing, at last gleaning a fine aftertaste from the words, so he said, that means fulfilling the purpose of the mouth. After all, ever since man could walk upright, he said, he is Man, because he no longer needs his mouth for grasping things, therefore can now speak, and kiss, and lastly combine those in the language of poetry, basically an attempt to enwhisper the body.

In the trunk in the old closet, hidden beneath layers of paper and bits of debris, I found the handful of pictures that he'd made of me. The black-and-white series, in a bucolic composition, a multi-stage metamorphosis. Me, first a man, in shirtsleeves, in a boyish pose, all my masculinity concentrated in my posture and facial expression, virile, even vigorous, without coming across as exaggerated, but in the next picture there are already small shifts, elements interchanged, the position of the leg, the expression on the lips, the curve of individual fingers, and in this way on and on, picture by picture, the inclination of the head, the position of the hand, the gentle tilting of the hips, the lifting of the brow, the gaze turned sidelong, such that finally, after only a dozen pictures, with but the smallest of discrepancies and without a change of clothes, the transformation is complete, and I have become a woman. But what does woman mean? At first girlish, practically genderless, yet with a hazy desire in the gaze and in the poise of the chest, then, bit by bit, in an almost cliché fashion, the willingness turns into a motherliness, wide and receiving, that is however suddenly broken in the next picture, replaced by the naughty, hungry pose of a coveting femininity, conscious of its power. I look at myself, in the pictures, that travesty of gestures, as he called it, and again, although strangely externalized, feel his gaze resting on me, which makes me feel numb.

30.

World, world, world, I say. And in the repeated iterations of the word, talking loudly to myself, in order to assure myself of things, to confirm my fragile here-and-now, the exact opposite ensues, a complete slipping away of the world. The sound looms in the foreground, and the meaning disappears entirely. Words, it seems to me, they are more distant sounds.

Death spits the world out, he said, and as I hear him whispering this inside of me, it throws me instantly back, throws me back into the world. I feel like I'm lying somewhere on the very edge.

31.

He wrote: The Clovis figures all around me, shady, these death-clowns, with the death-grin on the lips of the masks and in their all-capturing frocks, as they suck on the pacifiers and pop the air-filled ox bladders on the stone floors, hybrid beings, harlequins with their larvae-faces, and popping, relentless popping, in hordes that thicken around me, close in around me and scream the sounds of animals, inarticulate sounds, at the same time with their capes flapping like dark birds and relentless popping, ageless, nameless around me, just baboon faces.

32.

He had a habit of cutting up newspapers. World-particles, shards of truth, he said, as he spread letters, word pieces, sentence fragments, picture scraps out in front of him and brought them into a new order. He said: I'm bringing them into a new disorder. He did this with extraordinary precision. It was a text-mending, he said, a Tartagliad, the fantasy version of a meaning.

33.

Every moment the question poses itself to me: Is mine love, or is it mere delusion? Because he is dead, my sentiments live only from the remembered, melted away and arbitrarily remodeled. The recipient of my love is just a conglomeration of pictures, flat, mirages, that I hold meaninglessly in my hands. For instance, the picture of him writing naked at his desk, with legs crossed, the head, neck, pointedly bent, and completely absorbed in the sound. This picture, at first it triggers euphoria and, above all, desire, and everything inside of me yearns to touch him, to feel him, like I often did when he wrote, without a sound. And all of a sudden it's clear to me, like paper, and the dead beloved becomes a picture, with the sole purpose of freeing me from delusion.

34.

An unreal memory: We were at a masked party in a friend's studio together. The staged scene: red-shrouded candles, tabourets, hookahs, and steaming dishes of incense before the dark red walls, exotic plants and old instruments, cushions, Venetian mirrors, and in their midst all sorts of masks, harlequins, lolitas, pantaloons, fairy-tale creatures, belly dancers, demons, Chaplins, Pierrots, drags, and a wild, strange merriness. He was dressed as Tartaglia. As himself and yet as someone else, as he said. I fondly watched his eye-games, his child's mouth. This masquerade, he said, was a veiling and unveiling at once, an inversion, a turning inside-out and at the same time a frivolous veiling of the exterior. And with a laugh he vanished back into the crowd.

35.

A final present: His death-mask came in the mail. By whom made? On whose behalf? A small box, nondescript, which upon opening it, at first absentminded -though not without curiosity- sent me toppling into unspeakable confusion and anxiety, into desperation, from which, despite the near and loving people around me, I could not be freed for days and weeks. The whole time the mask lay there, unmoved and threatening, still wrapped in the plastic and paper packaging as before, on his desk where I had opened it. I allowed no one to get close to it, to touch it, not even me, because I feared I might give in to my compulsion and destroy it, with the result that, not at first but after a while, and contrary to my intention, his desk, sacred and awe-inspiring, seemed engulfed by an altar's aura.

Only after weeks, during which I stalked around the mask, scrutinizing it from different angles and distances, often for hours on end, did I come close to it. It didn't change. It sat there quietly, as though rescued from the constant air of transformation, lost within itself. Its face bore an expression that seemed to me equally familiar and unreal: Relief. I reached out to feel it, cautiously, finally touched it, stroked it, fondled it, until I dared to place it over my face, looked at myself, and saw him.

36.

This morning I found -there could be no mistaking it- one of his pubic hairs in the butter. As though frozen, I smeared it on my bread and swallowed it.