

Marcus Speh
Romancing My Youth

I

AS A BOY, I often laid in my bed and stared through a hole in the ceiling at the ceiling of the apartment above us where a Viking woman lived. The raw idiom in which she summoned her gods seemed funny to my callow youth, even though we weren't Christians. When I met her on the stairs, I focused on her freckles, which, I imagined, ran over her neck and shoulders, across the thin skin of her sternum towards her nipples as if they were insects following a sugar track, and who suddenly stood in front of a red, round temple on whose high roof's middle an opening lead deep down to the place where we all come from and where we all want to get back to. I saw myself with many women then: one for every aspect of humanity, all of them satisfied to be near me, to experience my expert touch. I was a geyser of horniness, spilling my seed freely, seeking fraternity and fertility. Such were my fantasies before I grew up and lost my savvy once and for all like a mute seer, who must go on singing even though he's long lost his tongue.

II

WHEN I WAS YOUNG I received luncheon vouchers instead of pocket money. Every Sunday, I got a poem written by my mother's hand and decorated with florets even if the verses were desperately unhappy and depressing. Bachmann, Celan, Plath were served as a matter of course alongside cake, usually Frankfurt crown cake, because once my mother had mastered making it, we could no longer wrest the butter cream syringe from her. I had to read the poem out loud. She'd look upon me with pride while my dad looked like the young Thomas Bernhard: somewhat repugnant with his half-open sulky lips and large, protruding, yellowish eye-balls. He slowly, rhythmically opened and shut his eyelids like a breathing toad. The final event of every Sunday family event was the waltz that I had to dance with my pygmy sister while my parents felt each other up on the couch as if we weren't in the room. I usually closed my eyes and tried to escape to the inside of my head. I always felt like the envoy of another, braver world, who'd only come to cancel the show and to send them all home, knowing that their homes were gone: the whores and schlehmihls, the wasted poets and post card painters, who had survived the war. I stuffed myself with cream cake and longed for better days, quietly burping Beethoven's Fifth between mouthfuls.

III

AS A TEENAGER, I went across the Iron Curtain every year to spend the summer in pioneer camps for boys and girls. I had a diary, a thin book wrapped in red cloth, which I loved. I painted the first letter on every new page rather than write it. My life seemed boring to me: this book was going to be about calligraphy. It wasn't even a book, it was a sign in itself, a sign of my flight to the stars. The camp management had always lots of activities planned for us. Gladly, they involved males and females. They observed us doing our exercises, playing ping-pong, walking about the grounds as young people do, and eating together. We slept in separate quarters, of course. Everything that we did was recorded, which somehow did take the spontaneity away. We were never told what to do or not to do though it was clear, kind of, that we were not supposed to fall in love or respond to our crushes. I fell in love each summer. Once, I was crazy about the camp nurse: she was fat and friendly and she smelled exquisite, not like a nurse at all. Best of all: she'd read everything that I was reading and we could actually talk about things using the books between us as bridges. My happiness was complete when an older boy broke my nose – he was a lot more brutal than I thought possible – and I had to go to the infirmary which was run by the nurse. I've forgotten her name so I'm just going to make one up: Jacqueline. Whenever I fell in love, I got my heart broken. Every summer.

IV

WHEN I SAW THE STONY FEET OF THE HOLY MAN IN THE CATHEDRAL, I asked my father if I could touch them but my father said no and gave me a free lecture on respecting the dead instead. His annotations on relics were rich and flawless, his wit was apt to distract me from anything but my father's fat round face glistening with the complacency of the erudite. We shared access to the same red-haired, wild muse whose wrinkles laughed story-storms and whose facial detail was absorbing. Still, I longed to touch those stone feet. I admired the toes the nails the way the naked feet of the saint stood up against anyone and anything in this church that made me feel like a nameless body in a herd, our eyes bulging at the deeds of the pure and the blessed. Years later, in the confessional, I talked about the anger against my father and the lust for my mother and, again, I received a stern speech, this time from the priest. I secretly gave him the finger and I knew God would approve of my rebelliousness. It was a care-free moment of belief. There was a queue outside the box and two lights - one green one red. A person would enter when the green light came on. I never saw anyone come out of that place. I was now old enough to stare at anything without being told off, but the monks had wisely removed the encased saint, possibly because they smelled insurrection. I don't think the priest or my father or anyone understood my infatuation with his grey granite feet that had six toes each just like mine.