

aristide antonas / THE VOICE

'Open the hand now.'

I open the hand.

'Give the man the key.'

I stretch out the hand and give the key.

'Take what he's giving you.'

The man gives me a box. I take it.

'Say "Thank you".'

I say 'Thank you'.

'Now turn towards the pathway and walk slowly.'

I turn backwards and start to walk on the 'pathway', if the route marked out in the yard can be called a 'pathway'. I pass over an embankment (I could say a small hill). The enclosed landscape has been neglected for years. Mounds and potholes have gradually formed there, and trees have sprouted. Beside the river, which cuts the yard in two, grow rushes, wickers and reeds. The box the man gave me is heavy. Made of dull lead, it has a lock on the lid. I don't know what it contains, but I'll keep on holding it, until I'm instructed to leave it. I shake it lightly, so that maybe I'll hear something, maybe I'll understand what's hidden inside it. But I hear nothing. I walk along the pathway. I thrust my way through the trees.

'Stop walking', says the voice.

I stop.

'Put what the man gave you on the ground.'

I leave the box. I'm curious to learn what's inside it.

'Stand up straight.'

I stand up straight. I remain immobile, I watch the clouds, I stretch my arms out to the side; I notice that the voice stays silent and indeed that the silence is longer than expected. This happens sometimes. And when it does, I manage to think of something or – sometimes – even to do something. The

voice said 'Get up', it didn't say 'Stay still'. And so, without disobeying any order, I can move in any direction I want.

However, do I want to move in a particular direction? To be honest, what I want is to bend down again towards the ground and open the box. But in doing something like that, perhaps I disdain the last command, which said 'Stand up straight'. Does 'Stand up straight' mean 'straighten your body'? If so, then I've already obeyed that order, I stood up straight and now I can give my body any pose, even the pose of bending over in front of the box. But if 'Stand up straight' means 'Remain standing' or 'Keep away from the box', then I have to confess that the return to the box means disobeying the voice and direct confrontation with it. I've no desire for confrontation, especially as I suspect that the box is locked. I think I should remain immobile for the time being, awaiting a new order and examining – while waiting – the possibilities I have for minor movements.

The ideas that come to my mind from time to time have, of course, no particular weight. They pass before me just as time passes, in the end leaving no traces anywhere: they are simple ideas that passed; even more so: they are ideas because they passed, ended, vanished. Sometimes they are attempts to understand 'the spirit' of the voice. They travel like the passing clouds and indeed without causing rain or lightning. My time is full of ideas, but the events that happen in time are not affected by the ideas, are not influenced by 'my' thoughts; the voice – only that – organizes the events, the voice determines my participation in the situations. The voice orders, I carry out its orders. The voice undertakes to bring to pass my smallest movements, it also undertakes to form my behaviour in the most difficult circumstances; it leaves no leeway for rolling down into 'my' world. And even now, as I am developing thoughts again, I wonder why it doesn't stop me.

'Don't bend over', says the voice. 'There's no point in bending over. Look at the stairway to your right'.

Once again I realized that the voice sees. And indeed it sees more than what is in front of me, it can see – I think – all my stupid intellectual courses; it can prevent them or – more rarely – it can approve and endorse them.

I look at the 'stairway'. It is more of a stepped pathway than a 'stairway'. Some upright stones retain the earth and create the impression of a stepped ascent. Bushes grow to right and left.

'Now climb the stairway.'

I do as the voice says. I come out in a space reminiscent of a glade: the trees all around me form a circle, in the middle, some rocks were revealed. To the east – from where I am – within an opening amidst the trees, part of the collapsed building is visible: the crack through its mass can be seen, and through the crack, some image of the view outside the yard can be discerned: the continuation of the river, a fragment of the smooth bank and the river estuary at the sea. I could go that way some time, no door blocks the road.

I grew up in the yard, I've lived in the yard for years, I've no desire to change my place of residence. But I like to think that sometime I shall travel in that direction. I wait for the voice; I wait for it to ask me to do something outside the yard.

I try to remember the man who gave me the box. Possibly we've met before, but I can't remember when or how. The half-ruined building that surrounds the yard is not deserted. I'm lucky enough to approach the building, to see at close hand. Some parts of it remind me of the insects' nests one finds on lifting a heavy stone from the ground: people are moving slowly, many people, dun in colour, like the building, as if born from dry mortar or half-demolished bricks. The man who gave me the box was not like them. He was clean, one could say he was made of light. If I have seen him before, I think that when I saw him – if I saw him – he was not like that. I don't remember having seen a man illuminated like that, although I rarely approach the building. I rarely meet people. The orders I receive from the voice involve me in activities inside the space of the yard, which – it should be noted – is by no means small. The voice keeps me at a distance from the people and the building.

I usually sleep in the tent, I change its position frequently. Usually the voice instructs me to pitch it next to the river that cuts the yard in two. When the

weather is fine, I lie down outside, under the sky. It is damp and there are mosquitoes. I light fires. I hold special lamps that ward off the insects.

'Do you see a large brush-shoe in the sky?'

I turn towards the sky, but I see nothing of the kind.

'You should see it. You will see it. Now you see it.'

And indeed, I see it now. It's a hairbrush that develops like the sole on a sandal. The voice often plays such tricks. Perhaps it is trying to impress me with its powers. Perhaps, again, it wants to divert my attention from something, from the box in this case.

I move the tent close to the bridge, as instructed. From the opposite bank I see another tent pitched, similar to mine. Tonight the moon is high, there is no breeze at all, my neighbour opposite lit a fire.

'Walk towards the bridge', says the voice.

I am tired. I get up with difficulty. But I obey and I walk towards the bridge.

'Now cross the bridge.'

The river waters shimmer in the moonlight. I cross the bridge.

'Head for the neighbouring tent.'

I head that way. Sitting beside the fire is the man who gave me the box. He pays no attention to my presence. The fire illuminates him and he illuminates the fire, as if he is making it with his eyes. Finally he says:

'You gave me the key.'

With a slow gesture of the hand he points to the key that I gave him some time ago: he hung it from the branch of the nearest tree. 'You gave me the key', he repeats, 'but you took the box from me'.

'Say, "I know"', the voice instructs me.

'I know.'

You know that you took the box from me, you also know where the box is. Is it in your tent?'

'Say "No"', says the voice.

'No.'

The man who gave me the box wrinkles his brow and frowns.

'Where have you left it then?'

'I left it somewhere there. I walked and then I turned ...'

'Say "I don't remember"', the voice interrupts.

'But', I say, 'It's strange! Something prevents me from remembering the particular place. I can't recall where I left it. I've forgotten where I put it'.

'You've forgotten!'

'Say: "Yes, I don't remember"'.  
'Yes, I don't remember.'

'Yes, I don't remember.'

The man knows I'm telling lies, yet he doesn't seem to take umbrage. His gaze, which until now was fixed on the fire, turns towards me, full of understanding and compassion.

'And now say: "It's late, let us rest, Goodnight".'

'It's late, let us rest. Goodnight.'

The man bends over the fire again. He says nothing.

'About turn.'

'Walk towards the bridge.'

'Cross the bridge.'

'Go back into your tent.'

I do as the voice tells me.

I am woken by the owl's screech near my ear. The damp is piercing. It is cold. The water in the river burbles slowly over the rocks.

'Go back to sleep', says the voice.

I can't get back to sleep.

'Turn over onto the other side and try again.'

I turn over onto the other side, but I still can't get back to sleep. I get up again.

'Don't stand up. Lie down.'

I stand up. I don't lie down. Sometimes the voice is conspicuously indifferent to my state.

'Lie down again.'

No. I remain standing.

'Go back to bed.'

I don't go back to bed.

'Don't go near the tent flap.'

I do go near the tent flap and make to go outside.

'Don't go outside.'

I'm already heading towards the bridge. The moon will soon set.

'Turn back.'

I don't turn back.

'Don't cross the bridge.'

I'm already moving towards the stranger's tent. The man who gave me the box is sleeping in the open air. He is well covered, yet I still wonder why he isn't cold. Above him is the key, hanging from a thread.

'Keep well away. Don't touch the key. Don't take the key.'

I take the key. I turn towards the bridge. I walk faster. I gulp gusts of the night air, which dizzies me. I run towards the path. It is dark. Even so, the moon lights the way. I thrust through the trees again, I pass beside the embankment, I splash about in the mud.

'Stay away from the box', says the voice.

And I come closer to the box.

'Be careful, now. Don't put the key in the lock. Don't open the lid.'

I bring the key to the lock; I put the key in the lock and I open the lid. The box is empty. I slide my palm over the smooth surfaces of its inside.

In the darkness, I go down to the water. The moon is disappearing. I close the key inside the box – the lid locks automatically – and I throw the box into the river. I sit on a stone, I hear the box crash against the rocks, borne further and further away by the current of the water. For a moment I think that was the last time I heard the voice speak. But I am mistaken.