

Montserrat Roig

THE SONG OF YOUTH

‘And what if I want to die?’

‘You know very well that here we don’t let anyone die. We die when it’s our time.’

He told her the time. Six o’clock. At six I’ll be waiting for you, at the bottom of the path that leads up to the vineyards. The toilet door closed behind his white back and the tiles returned to their place. She took her time before emerging. She did her hair and the mirror reflected a pair of reddened eyes back at her. She burst into tears, full of a wild joy. She cried while contemplating herself in the mirror. She liked her new face, she realised she was pretty. Her parents were standing in the middle of the bar waiting for her, ready to go home. She heard her father say something about ‘documents and family’, while her mother added they would have to ‘buy a new bed’. After lunch, Lluís would be coming over with his parents to finalise the wedding arrangements. He had three days’ leave.

She raised a hand and held it against the ray of sunlight coming in through the window. It was a transparent hand with protruding bones, riddled with swollen blue rivers cut through by clods of earth coloured stains. Then she held it by the wall. The hand was no longer as transparent. When we get old, she thought, our bones seems to have a life of their own. My skeleton is trying to burst through my skin. But, as thin as it may be, it’s the only thing stopping me from being what I really am: grotesque. It’s hard to believe that our bodies are made up mostly of water. No, not water. It’s jelly.

She listened to the fourth woman wheeze more slowly now, her hand still held next to the peeling paint. She saw a hand stretched towards a sun depositing its fiery dregs along the jagged crests before it disappeared beyond the mountains. The skin was still elastic then. There was fat underneath it. It wasn’t like wrinkled leather. Lluís kissed her hand before leaving. ‘In three weeks you’ll be my wife. I love you.’ The slate soil made for darker puddles where the uppermost vineyards grew. ‘I want you,’ he said as they lay down among the vines. The path up to the vineyards was long. She’d gone up there my bicycle, listening to her heart pound from the tips of her toes up to her brain. The

vines formed parallel lines, just like the rays of sunlight that made the dust dance. A landscape of vines that almost kissed the peaks. ‘Shh...’ he whispered once again.

She smoothed down the hem of the sheets with both hands before suddenly clenching them, remembering a youthful hand whose skin still hid the bones. She felt the sopping wet white shirt on top of her and saw the glistening vines stretching in two parallel lines towards infinity. A body that was becoming hers. She was he. ‘Where are you from?’ she asked when he was inside her. ‘Hell.’ A cloud covered the sun and the room fell into darkness. That very evening, he told her, he was to go back to the front. Hearing those words, she tore open his shirt and dug her nails hard into his back.

‘Do you think we’re going to make your bed for you all day?’ howled the nurse. ‘Just look what you’ve done! We’re not here to wait on you!’

‘Get lost.’

‘You really are a wicked old woman.’

‘I don’t want to die.’