

Some time ago, during his several months of isolation in Berlin, he had biked across the metropolis to the Berggruen Museum, a place he had never previously visited, to see its large collection of works by Picasso, Cézanne, Matisse, and Klee. The weather on that autumn day was overcast, yet dry, but nevertheless he drove through what turned out to be a wholly deserted Mitte: he barely saw any other bikers, nor the usual masses of cars on the road, nor the large crowds of pedestrians which, commonly, was ever-present all the way down the Unter den Linden. Similarly, when biking through the Brandenburger Tor, he noticed only about a handful of tourists, snapping the usual photos of the old monument, whose quadriga Napoleon once stole and brought with him to Paris in 1806, only for it to be brought back again eight years later after Napoleon's downfall.

From here, he biked past the golden Siegessäule and from the major roundabout at the Ernst-Reuter Platz, he followed the Otto-Suhr-Allee straight to the Charlottenburg Palace, just across from which the art museum is located in two symmetrical white buildings, formerly officer barracks, that were completely rebuilt in 1960 after the destructions of the war. If Mitte, on that day, had seemed to be largely empty, Charlottenburg seemed altogether abandoned, and when he later stepped inside the museum, he discovered himself to be something like the sole visitor present in the entire building. Likewise, approaching the ticket office, he took the elderly German woman seated behind the counter by complete surprise, and she also ended up merely charging him for a student ticket, even though he had finished studying some years ago.

Inside the empty galleries, each step he took reverberated. He wandered the marble floors, climbed spiral staircases, strode from wing to wing, but met no one, not a single soul, apart from an occasional museum guard and the changing faces of the portraits on the walls; faces whose eyes were all following him inquiringly, scrutinising

his presence. Which was not much unlike what he, in general, felt that the faces of his surroundings, yes, even the voices on the telephone, had been doing habitually ever since he had first returned to Berlin this summer, when he, rather abruptly, had fled Copenhagen only to find that nothing – and no one – seemed to be waiting for him here, in the German capital; that perhaps the truth was that he was not even needed here.

On this day, he eventually found himself standing in front of a Picasso portrait of Dora Maar. *Dora Maar aux ongles verts*, he read on the description, and he did indeed notice the green fingernails on her hands. One of these hands was lower, held vertically in front of her chest, the fingers outspread; the other was leaning on her chin, one of her fingers reaching the corners of her lips. Just above from which Dora Maar's eyes were peering out somewhat enigmatically. However, what especially caught his attention was the way that her figure, including the entire right side of her face, seemed to be practically leaning into the greyness of the background, as if she was momentarily about to turn away, exiting the frame completely.

A sight which made him think of Dora Maar's extensive artistic life as a photographer, a painter, and a poet, and yet how she, nevertheless, commonly was known as the muse of Picasso and how she, by means of his brushstrokes, became *The Weeping Woman*, the anguished and desperate woman of Picasso's fantasy, a woman who fought for his love, who lived and died purely for him. He thought of how, at this point, it was a well-established fact that the Spanish painter had been abusive towards her; that he had repeatedly cheated on her and had, among other women, continued his liaison with Marie-Thérèse Walter for the duration of his and Dora Maar's relationship; that he had even actively tried to pin them against each other, Dora and Marie-Thérèse, making them fight for their place with him, the master painter, the genius, the legend.

He thought about how he recalled having once read that Dora Maar never liked Picasso's portraits of her, never saw a version of herself in them, only *his* version of her: a distorted human profile; a ghost of a human being; and, at times, nothing but a perverse male fantasy. Which made him reflect on whether a portrait could ever be anything else but a painter's shallow version of a human being, a colourful surface containing nothing? He thought about how some portraits likely strove for beauty; others for status, for a show of power; while others still aimed for something more in depth: for portraying personality, for telling a version of the complicated narrative we also know by the name of identity. Just like authors like himself aimed for with the character descriptions of their stories. Or, on an even more basic level, how people simply did it every day in their ordinary life: tried to understand the people surrounding them, their family, their friends, their love interests. Attempting to understand the patterns and norms that characterised them and knit together a framework; a box into which they could enter some things and exclude others; deciding, once and for all, on which actions and interests that were verifiably *him* or *her* and which categorically were not. Yes, he decided, this was what we all did all the time. With everything, everyone. We observed. We sorted out impressions. And we categorised and framed them in order to put our life, and the lives that interfered with it, into a larger system that we could try and comprehend, since the real thing that surrounded us and governed it all – the pure chaos, the complete anarchy of impulses – was simply too much to bear. And so, maybe we merely missed the mark too often, he thought. Maybe we merely grasped a faint version of the truth of it all. Maybe we rather told ourselves a story which we desired to be true, a story compatible with the story that we told ourselves about our own identity. And maybe, all too often, the end result was something a bit like Picasso's portraits of

Dora Maar: a mere fantasy. Thus, leaving hidden behind it, a palpable distance between the human being and the ghost. And between how, in the case of Picasso's portrait of Dora Maar, a man sees a woman and how a woman might view herself. A gap – no, an abyss – that was, most likely, impossible to close. But if this much was true, he thought, how could one then go about it differently? How could one ever go about trying to understand the complex nature of another human being – yes, even with the best of intentions – without ending up short-handed, possibly even involuntarily involved in an act of deception, of caricaturing, or simply distorting the truth anew?

At this point, he, once again, returned his focus to the details of the painting. There was something very compelling about that portrait, he felt. Something about her posture, this before-mentioned bizarre way of practically leaning out of the canvas, which fascinated him. Whether purposely or not, this particular portrait seemed, perhaps solely due to this detail, different to him than any of Picasso's other Dora Maar depictions he had previously seen. Obviously, it was a highly stylised painting as well, yet, even so, the motif still felt to him somehow less captured by the painter and, in a mysterious way, to be operating more on the premises of the painted one, although he was not immediately sure why he felt this way. Conceivably, it was related to the odd posture, the half-way sliding out of the frame. He felt, strangely enough, that it delt some strength to her demeanour. A kind of edge. Almost as if Dora Maar herself were taking matters into her own hands, those with the green-painted fingernails, threatening at any point to leave the painting, to rebel against the Picasso's fantasies and thus take back control of her narrative. Yes, it was almost as though Dora Maar, in this painting, despite the expressed wishes of the artist, had managed to steal the picture, to change the story: to endow herself with a voice of her own.