

FELICITAS HOPPE

Translated by A. A. Srinivasan

## Head and Neck

Head too heavy, hands too large, legs too short, my father said, setting me inside a cage and giving me a friendly wave through the bars while I watched as he glued matchstick boxes at the kitchen table because he had one leg too few and his left arm dangled back and forth next to his body like a dead branch in the wind. While we waited for men healthy enough to carry the matchstick boxes in large crates from the house, he told me of circuses and fairs, and over the bars he threw little bits of bread, which I caught in the air with my lips. He had me dance on my hind legs and held shiny carrots above my nose so that I would jump for them, and I understood that he wanted to make a dancing bear out of me, one onto which you would fasten a pack to its back and then shepherd through the world. Ah, you'll see how much the people will like that, my father called out, and turned on his leg like a spinning top so that his left arm flapped like the weather vane on the roof, of which I only know from his stories. If he was in a good mood, he accompanied his dance with a song. He had a lovely, strong voice, and I listened to him, my tongue wagging from happiness, and I hung on his lips like a piece of marzipan.

Soon my nose projected through the bars, and my father taught me new songs full of travels over the mountains and through valleys, along small rivers that flowed through villages where trees lined the entrance routes, villages where wells in the center greeted travelers. It is only of girls we will not sing as we amble through the world, whether the girls like it or not. I stretched toward my father to better read his lips, and with a voice scratchy with excitement, I joined in. Here you see me, and there, my father. He guides me through the world on the chain of his one-legged adventures. It smells like wind, like weather, the sun is high in the sky, and the pack on my back is light like a little pack of cotton balls, only my head on my broad round neck is heavy as a stone that, at the moment, wants to roll down the slope. We sit on this rock and honestly share what man and bear share: the fruits of the forest and the field, and what can be gathered from

people's gardens to tuck in pockets while passing by. We never stopped too long, not in the forests and not in people's barns. My father spun like a top on his leg and hung carrots over my nose, which I jumped after until sweat dripped down my neck. I caught bits of bread like mosquitoes in flight, I danced on my hind legs to my father's songs and held my head tightly between my hands so it wouldn't bounce away and roll between the feet of some unsuspecting onlooker.

When we were finished people stood there, at a loss, as if they didn't know that we were entitled to a reward. Some took us along to the pubs, but the meals were meager and were passed in silence because my father didn't drink, didn't join in with songs about girls who, with starry eyes and billowing skirts, lurked behind gates.

Those who search for us will find us, where you find humans and bears, in caves buried beneath leaves in dreams, for which every night is too brief. My father wakes me before the sun rises, rubs the sand from my eyes and pours cold water into them. The day is long, the road is far, he calls out, fastening the pack to my back. I take my head in my hands and start running. Here, I'm walking, and over there my father walks impatiently, following at my heels while his steps become slower day by day, his breath shorter.

At night I lie next to him under the blanket and would like to wait until his breath becomes so short that he disappears entirely, but my sleep is even shorter. Still, I know that one day I will no longer hold my head between my hands. It has become so big that my ears now jut out far beyond my neck. My eyes bulge and my nose drips incessantly while walking into the city, where people expectantly stand in the square and clap the minute my father begins to spin on his leg.

And there I was, with short legs and a dripping nose and pained looks as I jumped for carrot and bread, and because it suddenly felt as if someone had thrown a club between my legs, I used my hands to snatch the carrot. My head rolled from my shoulders, and the stone from my heart stopped directly before the feet of the girls who stood close behind my father. They greedily lunged and began to fight until the girl with the most powerful hands lifted my head and carried it away in her apron, her head held high. I threw my arms in the air and stumbled forward, my tongue hanging, collar flapping, without glancing back, not at the crowd that was slowly scattering, and not

at my father, who stood in the middle of the square like the slender pedestal of a local monument.

When the men come to pack the matchstick boxes in crates and haul them away, I will no longer crouch down beside the pots in the dish cupboard to watch through the half-open door how they enter the kitchen on two legs and lift the crates with two arms and carry them out as if they were air filled with glass-wool. They return with new empty crates that they balance high over their heads like waiters and put them down with sweeping gestures next to the kitchen table. They do not sweat and do not smell like work, only like wind and weather. Before they press a bundle of bills into my father's hands, they stop for a moment, provokingly, in the middle of the kitchen as if they deserve a reward. My father greedily takes in their scent and wishes they would stay. But he drinks neither with the one-legged nor the two-legged, nor will he find any winter sleep.