

Yves Bonnefoy
The Curved Planks

The man standing on the bank, near the boat, was big, a giant of a man. Behind him the moonlight was reflected on the river. Hearing a faint noise the child, who was approaching in complete silence, understood that the boat was stirring, brushing against the dock or a stone. He was clutching a small copper coin tightly in his hand.

“Good day, sir”, he said in a clear voice, clear but trembling for he was afraid he might draw too much attention to himself from the man, the giant, who stood there motionless. But the ferryman, who seemed distracted, had already noticed him, through the reeds. “Good day, young fellow”, he replied. “Who are you?”

“Oh, I don’t know”, said the child.

“What do you mean, you don’t know? Haven’t you got a name?”

The child tried to take in what the man meant by a name. “I don’t know”, he said again, quickly enough.

“You don’t know! But you know very well what you hear when someone calls you or hails you.”

“Nobody calls me.”

“Nobody calls you when it’s time to go home? When you’ve been playing outside and it’s time for your meal, or for bed? Haven’t you got a father, a mother? Where do you live? Tell me.”

And now the boy sought to understand what the man meant by a father, or a mother, or a place to live.

“A father,” he said, “what’s that?”

The ferryman sat down on a stone near his boat. His voice came from less far away in the darkness. But at first he had chuckled a bit.

“A father? Well, that’s someone who takes you on his knees when you cry, and sits down beside you in the evening when you’re afraid to go to sleep, and tells you a story.”

The boy did not reply.

“It’s quite true that often there is no father”, the giant continued, as if he had been giving some thought to the matter. “But then, it is said, there are sweet young women who light the fire and sit you down close by it, and sing you a song. If they move away, it’s to cook some food, that’s all; you can smell the oil which is heating up in the pot.”

“I don’t remember that either”, said the child in his light crystalline voice. He had drawn closer to the ferryman, who now fell silent; he could

hear the man's regular slow breathing. "I have to cross the river", said the child. "I have enough money to pay you."

The giant leaned over him, took him in his huge hands, placed him on his shoulders, straightened up and climbed into the boat, which gave way a little beneath his weight. "Off we go", he said, "hold on tightly to my neck." With one hand he gripped the child by a leg, with the other he stuck the pole in the water. With a sudden movement the boy clung on to the ferryman, and sighed. The ferryman was now able to grasp the pole with both hands. He steered the boat out of the mud, and it quit the shore, while the sound of the water grew stronger in the shadows, beneath the glimmers.

A moment later a finger touched his ear. "Listen", said the child, "would you like to be my father?" But he broke off at once, his voice choked by tears.

"Your father!" But I'm only the ferryman! I never move far from the two riverbanks."

"But I would stay with you, by the riverbank."

"To be a father, you have to have a house, don't you understand? I don't have a house, I live in the rushes by the river."

"I would be so happy to stay with you on the river."

"No", said the ferryman, "it isn't possible. Anyway, look!"

The child cannot fail to see that the boat seems to be sinking more and more beneath the man and himself, that their weight is increasing minute by minute. The ferryman has trouble moving forward; the water reaches the sides of the small boat, and then pours in, its currents filling the hull as they reach the top of the giant's legs, which are conscious that support from the curved planks is fading fast. All the same, the boat does not founder, rather it seems to vanish into the darkness, and the man is swimming now, with the little boy still holding fast to his neck. "Don't be afraid", he says, "the river isn't that wide, we'll soon reach the other side."

"Oh please, be my father! Be my house!"

"You must put all that out of your mind", replies the giant in a low voice. "Forget those words. Forget words."

He takes the boy's small leg, which is already immense, in his hand again, and with his free arm he swims in the endless space of colliding currents, gaping chasms, stars.

*From: 'Les Planches courbes': etchings by Paula Rego after the title piece from *Les Planches courbes* (Le Mercure de France, 2001), with a new translation by Anthony Rudolf (François Bénichou: November 2008).*