

“Writers are an indulgent lot.”

The words, though uttered casually, seemed to resonate above the mass of striving voices choking out virtually every other thought. I could not at first understand this isolated sound so near, almost inside my head. My mind refused to receive it. I looked about in a daze to find a face to attach to the voice but none that I saw returned my interest. There was no time to consider it further and it was quickly squeezed from memory as the crowd, mad with pleasure and desperate to see the popular figure just beyond my sight, surged forward again with the most palpable longing. Every heart seemed obsessed with a private mission until their excitement at his presence erupted and spread in waves of convulsion. The tremors began with those nearest him and spilled over onto their neighbors as they, too, were overcome, wrenching themselves grotesquely from the rest, barely able to contain their exultations.

The madness soon reached me and engulfed those around me as they began shouting. It was my turn and I had no will to resist. I dared not resist. “Hosanna, in the highest! Blessed is He who has come! Who comes in the name of the LORD!” My tongue had a celebration of its own, my body denied every other Master, and every part of my soul reveled until it was sore. I cavorted and danced with abandon, a man possessed of nothing, no expectations, no sense of time, no past, no future, no need or thought or will, not even able to breathe beyond this simple joy in the existence of the one I had come to see. My voice was nearly worn away with praise.

Afterward, I lay in a heap of wonderment. All my trove of words as a writer and poet tumbled forth into new consciousness and none seemed fit to tell my story. I was too breathless to record it, anyway, and chose simply to lay where I was under a roof of twilight and watch it melt away into a delirious fit of stars. I laughed hoarsely and closed my eyes to hold as tightly as I could what had sweetly filled my whole being, wanting to savor it all again as many times as possible.

When I had nestled into a most relaxed position, my eyes flew open with the jarring impact of what I had forgotten. Gathering myself quickly and regaining my bearings, I scanned quickly for the Temple complex, which dwarfed everything around it, and hurried along in that direction. Passing upstream through trickling crowds, I let nothing detain me on the way until the looming form of those sacred structures, nearly black in the waning light, finally dominated the horizons of my

vision. Unyielding and solemn, their towering edifices threatened to swallow whole my brief existence, and I succumbed like a child to the illusion that the buildings were swaying above me, almost imperceptibly, waiting to topple down upon my head. I began to draw back from them in horror.

But my retreat was stifled by the faint whisper of a hope that, despite the lateness of the hour, he might still be teaching or healing others within. I marveled at the thought of his touch, his voice. Chiding myself for giving in to silly fears, I stepped forward and entered a deep forest of columns and walked among them for a time, expecting that I would recognize him there, though I couldn't say why. Unable to discern his presence among the few stragglers, I turned and emerged into a courtyard under a fresh expanse of evening sky and strolled along in the open toward a central complex until a hand braced my shoulder from behind.

As I turned to greet it, my eyes were met by a hooded figure whose face was shrouded in impenetrable shadows, even as the full moon coldly outlined us both. He thrust a mute finger toward a notice carved in a strange tongue upon a marble partition. It seemed that I should know the words, yet they writhed and twisted just beyond the grasp of my senses. I moved closer to investigate them but could make nothing of what I saw.

My confusion must have been evident for, behind me, a distantly familiar voice explained, "It says, 'No stranger is to enter. . .'"

The fierce and imposing character of the outer walls had followed me within and pervaded the entire place. I turned and asked in confusion, "How can I be a stranger in my Father's house?" My voice was raw from the strain of shouting earlier.

Though his face remained indecipherable, I couldn't help sensing a slight smile in the man's reply, "Whoever is caught will be responsible for his own death. . ." I watched him steadily.

". . .which will immediately ensue."

My eyes instinctively swept over him. He was carrying no weapon. He made no movement, no sound. He only shared the silence of the evening with me as though we were sipping from the same refreshing fountain. In spite of his words, nothing in his manner was threatening. He held himself almost indifferently, not as one might expect from a man prepared to act. My mind flitted to the phrase, "For you neither enter yourselves nor allow those who would enter to go in."

The figure finally chose to break the stillness between us. “I stopped you because I had no intention of watching you blindly throw your life away. Besides, if you are looking for *him*, you won’t find him here. He’s left the city and the gates are closed for the evening.”

Despite the chill of feeling so transparent, a much deeper sense of disappointment settled over me at this news than I was ready to bear. Combined with the ordeal of the past few hours, a loneliness crept into my chest and I leaned against the partition to steady myself. My shadowy acquaintance took a step forward and remarked in a softer tone, “He will return, tomorrow.” This sudden expression of sympathy made him appear at least less... spectral.

It occurred to me why his voice had been distantly familiar. “You? Aren’t you the one who made that ridiculous declaration... something about all writers being, what was it?”

He straightened. “You mean that writers are ‘an indulgent lot’?”

“Yes, so that was you,” I replied, wearing my most distinct expression of disdain. The hood shuddered lightly with a gruff laughter that seemed to rise from a chasm in the sea.

A writer by trade, I was stung slightly by the insinuation of the remark but it had been previously all the more unbearable in its timing. I recalled it breeching the din which swelled about me as I plunged into my earlier mania. All of that tumult now in my memory did seem indulgent... but not shameful. He noticed the sullenness of my thoughtful expression.

“I saw you there.” he responded. I looked at him and wondered whether I had spoken out loud. “You were beautiful.”

This was too much, particularly from a stranger, and I turned away, pacing in the direction from which I had come. He followed at a distance behind me, leaving me to my thoughts. When I felt I had gathered myself, I paused to allow him to catch up until we were stepping together. Hoping to steer the conversation in a less personal direction, I asked over my shoulder, “Why do you think that the lot of us are indulgent?” and quickly realized that I had just impugned myself by my inclusive language. This made me wish I had gathered more carefully.

“The whole object of writing seems to be to lavish ardent attention upon a subject with which we are preoccupied for a time.”

“Are you a writer, then?” I asked, trying to draw him into a confession of

complicity.

Rather than responding, he studied me for a moment, then continued, “Do you really think it was a kind of madness that gripped you earlier? As a writer, is that how you would describe it?”

Again he was drawing us back into a less comfortable and more personal direction. I wasn’t sure why he would purposefully evade my question, but I let it drop as the bait he presented glittered with greater promise. It was true that I had, perhaps carelessly, labeled the experience for myself as a kind of “madness,” even though I suspected that this was not very realistic. Now that he questioned the legitimacy of this designation, I considered more closely what I had felt.

It was then that I became aware of him staring at me. “No, it wasn’t what I would have imagined madness to be like.”

“What was it, then?”

The experience was still so tender that my heart leapt as though it were being pricked by countless needles and the only word it bled was, “Clarity!” The sound of my own voice echoing among our surroundings was almost bracing to me. More subdued this time, I almost whispered, “I was awash in... clarity.”

He nodded slowly his agreement and muttered to himself, “That is indeed the very word.”

Becoming lost in his own contemplation, he led us both deeper into the moment. “I, too, had a crystalline vision, a moment so sane, so majestically rational and pure that it pained my very spirit to gaze upon it.”

“As the light of the sun might burn the eyes...” I added.

“As the pangs of love may awaken the dread of an eternal longing.”

I turned to look at him, struck through by the paradox of his metaphor, sensing more than I was able to properly grasp its intuitive poignancy. I wondered at this man who had shared my visions as though he were a twin, a distant brother I had never known. At certain intervals, as we turned down one street or another, rougher features began to emerge in the moonlight in spite of the sanctuary afforded by his deep hood.

I tried to gaze beneath that exterior to no avail. “Doesn’t love usually make a man blind?”

“Yes, you would be right... if I were speaking of that kind of ‘love.’”

Silence resumed between us and he turned aside onto a narrow lane. I

followed his lead, unmindful of where we were going as I knew little of the city. It was strange to observe a community which had approached, only hours before, a heightened frenzy, now laying down for the evening in quiet solitude. I thought I could sense it breathing peaceably, almost a tame thing. As our path began to ascend, my acquaintance returned to an earlier theme.

“Wouldn’t you say that, at the heart of the writing process is a very serious moral question which every writer is compelled to answer?”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“The moment pen touches to paper, at that very second, we have adopted some solution to the riddle that hangs above, or perhaps lies beneath, everything we do, even if we’ve unfortunately never given it a moment’s thought.”

He was provoking within me so many questions that I was unsure where to begin.

“Here we are,” he said abruptly, stopping before a simple house like every other we had passed. “Come in and be welcome. I can offer you a cup of water inside.” I was admittedly intrigued but unsure whether to impose.

“Please,” he insisted, opening the door wide and gesturing, “or are you burdened with so many other invitations?”

The evening was growing quite cool and I stepped inside. He encouraged me to make myself comfortable, removing his hood, and at last I was able to see him clearly. A stout man with pleasant, even if plain, features that were smartly dressed by a well-cropped beard, there was a fervent thoughtfulness behind his every expression. He grinned in a satisfying way and gave a few parting instructions to his servant for the evening.

At this point, more than anything else, I was trying to discern as much as I could about my curious host. He was clearly an educated man of a contemplative disposition, and his meditations upon the life of a writer were considerably aimed at himself as much as at me, which suggested that he would have described himself as a writer as well. I became immediately curious about any work he might have produced and allowed my eyes to drift about the room looking for scattered signs of his craft. His servant returned with a cup of water which had a slight musty odor but which I accepted gratefully.

As my host seated himself, he focused my attention upon the matter at hand once more, gesturing with his hands... “An ultimate purpose is always an ethical

matter. Because of this, every writer who tries their hand at any form of writing will find it impossible to escape answering or at least assuming an answer to the most fundamental ethical occupations... even if they've never considered them before."

How do you assume an answer to a question you've never considered? I rolled this peculiar riddle around on my tongue as I waited for him to finish the thought.

"And, perhaps most fundamental of all is whether the deepest purpose we hope to serve by writing is really worth pursuing."

How odd. I'm sure my face gave away immediately the consternation aroused by trying to untie this last little knot, but I couldn't help it. To ask whether my purpose for writing was worth pursuing had never occurred to me. I decided instead to follow a more objective line.

"Writing seems to me an essential aspect of civilization. Why wouldn't it be worth pursuing?"

"It may well be, but I am not at the moment considering whether writing bears an instrumental role in the realization of an abstraction like, 'civilization,' but whether the final goal any writer seeks from his writing is worth sacrificing a single second of his life for it."

A single second... Did such a thing mean so much compared with the joys and the meaning of writing? This sounded especially foreign coming from, as I thought, a man of letters, yet I began privately musing over whether the idea that my passions were justified because they were *mine* sounded selfish or not. In the meantime, my host broadened the point considerably.

"Of course, this question is not limited to writing and writers. It could as easily be asked by anyone regarding anything they choose to spend their time doing."

"You mean that we could consider, say, the ultimate purpose of having a conversation."

"Yes," he chuckled, "precisely."

The possibilities seemed endless. My host was playfully involved in our discourse, his face reacting to everything with the most active fascination. On my part, though I sensed that there was something deeper being uncovered than one would gain from friendly banter, I felt as though I were swimming against a tide of misgivings. Worse, my earlier fatigue had returned and was steadily creeping in

behind my eyes and along the bridge of my nose. Nevertheless, I pressed forward, trying not to stumble in my deliberations.

“How can anyone... assume an answer to a question... they’ve never before considered?”

“Were you not engaged in this only a moment ago?”

This was taxing the limits of my concentration. His surprise certainly seemed genuine, so I didn’t doubt his sincerity, but none of this was reassuring to me. I had apparently missed the obvious somewhere.

“I’ll explain,” he continued for my sake as he evidently recognized that I was flagging, “and then you are warmly invited to remain my guest for the night. I have a spare room and you shall take mine.”

I smiled inadvertently at his generous offer. He apparently had an unlimited store of surprises for me, and again, I suffered the impression that all this was a bit too much. Though he no longer felt so distant a stranger to me, I tried to raise my hand in a feeble objection to taking his very room from under him after everything else he had done for me, but he anticipated me.

“I insist. You need a good rest and you shall have the best room.”

In the back of my mind, I tried to make sense of the fact that he had that afternoon endured everything in the nature of the experiences which had apparently so exhausted my frame, yet he mentioned only my needs. I am definitely a pampered Westerner, I thought. I can’t keep up anymore. Resolved to get more exercise, I could see that the look on his face meant that there was no use in further debate. I nodded my acceptance to him.

“Good. Now, if you can remain with me a few moments longer...”

“I’ll be fine,” I remarked, stifling a yawn.

“...then, I shall draw out how it can be that you can assume an answer to a question which has never occurred to you and prove that you have, in fact, performed this feat already twice during our conversation.”

This ought to be good, I thought, raising an eyebrow at him.

“If I may, I will begin by pointing out that you were apparently puzzled when I mentioned as a possibility that our purpose in writing may not be worth pursuing.” He paused to make sure that I was still with him.

“Yes, I remember.”

“Did it not seem to you an odd thing to ask?”

“What?”

“To ask whether our purpose in writing is worth pursuing?”

“Oh, yes, it was perfectly alien to my mind,” I reflected.

“Then, there you are. That is a question to which you have already assumed an answer.”

“How again... have I already answered this?” As he continued, a blanket of drowsiness slowly enveloped me.

“You’ve answered it because you have chosen to be a writer. In choosing to write, you must have assumed an answer to the question which was, as you said, ‘perfectly alien’ to you. You adopted it as true that writing *must be* a deserving preoccupation. The same was presumed in that moment when you ironically suggested the possibility of conversing on the topic of the worthiness of conversation. In the very act of speaking, you grasped at an answer even though you had never before considered such a curious question. And yet...”

It was only a matter of moments before my snoring gave me away.