

WAKING STATE

In the room in which the two of us work
there's no chair — so we have to stand —
we do little more than stand around,
but one of us keeps an eye on the corridor
in case someone should come —
no one comes,
but we know someone might come
and we keep an eye on the corridor
for if someone should come
we would quickly begin turning one wheel
which drives another wheel,
the first makes a G sound,
the other an F-sharp sound,
and the dissonance sets our teeth on edge,
our foreheads collapse into five or six wrinkles,
proof we are working hard,
this would please the someone in the corridor,
and this is why we keep an eye open,
but no one ever comes.

Sometimes we have the need and walk
to the end of the corridor —
then we see them, standing around nonchalantly,
pretending to talk to one another,
smiles all over their faces, full of honeyed greetings,
limitless love and trust radiating from their eyes,
but we know
that as soon as we pass them
and as soon as they see our backs moving away,
their heads will come together again,
one of them will pull a notebook from his pocket
and mark down the time of day beside our names
and will replace the notebook so fast
we wouldn't have guessed they were spying on us,

so that
they wouldn't know that we knew, for if they knew,
they would have to think of what they would answer
if we asked — and if one answer differed
from another answer
it would be extremely embarrassing all around —
once, a long time ago, somebody turned his head
and caught a glimpse of malice on one of the faces
that a second earlier was smiling wholeheartedly:
the hand tightened on the pencil and notebook,
he turned crimson
and only with great effort and throat-clearing
could he retrieve the malice from his features,
but his eyes — his sly, smouldering, Cain-like eyes —
did not wonder, only the mouth
began to curl upward —
months later,
when the episode was long forgotten,
both of them disappeared, and we all behaved
as if we had noticed nothing.

When the bell rings
we pretend not to hurry
as if the need wasn't there
after such a long day
to race out of there —
quietly, slowly,
we adjust our hats, our coats,
and exuding well-being from our faces,
we slowly walk out.

Outside, on the street, Weinstein joins me,
his face pinched, his eyes runny,
his small shoulders twisted,
he looks up at me with his twisted neck,
and his words blurt out:
“Couldn't we cross over there

where their missiles won't threaten us,
it's unbearable here. . . .”
I wave the suggestion away. “Stupid,
I crossed over here because these missiles
were aimed in their direction —
here you can go to a bright home each night,
but over there it's dark, even at night. . . .”
“True,” Weinstein snorts, his head falls,
“I don't know why I always forget that . . .”
and he scampers off ahead of me,
like an ape, swaying his uneven arms
homeward, where his wife awaits him
with her paralytic smile, in her wheelchair
for the last twelve years,
and his son whose hair hangs down to his shoulders,
who reads the stock quotations every evening
with his feet on the table
from which his father takes his dinner.

I go home too.
Lola, my Italian lover, falls all over me with a scream,
“Oh, my sweet, you came so late,
you must be hungry, come into the bedroom,
let me give you something, let me give,”
and while I hurriedly take off my coat, she hurriedly
takes off her blouse, her skirt;
while I put my hat on the hook,
she lasciviously rocks and moans on the bed;
while I get out of my jacket and trousers,
she pants and screams, tosses her arms;
I fall down alongside her,
“Oh, yes,” she whispers, “come, come,” and licks my ears,
something I don't like,
I get on top of her. . . .
Somebody knocks.

Lorenzo enters, my young friend.

“I can’t afford supper. Invite me?”

I nod, and he glances at me with contempt from behind his glasses.

“I hate you,” he says, “you always eat supper.”

“Would you hate me if I didn’t give you any? Then I won’t!

Then you might even like me.”

“Oh, forget it. I’m too hungry to argue.

Yesterday Isabel gave herself to me.

That’s the real reason why I hate you.

Until yesterday I loved her and it was good.

I like loving, it makes me happy.

You handed me the key,

told me what to do

to get her.

I did it.

I got her.

Now she loves me, and I don’t love her,
and I’m unhappy.”

“But I thought — ”

“That’s the trouble,

you always think something

and then you think what you think is true,

but you and me, we’re different,

you want to get — and this is typical of you —

but I want to give.”

“Oh, no, Lorenzo, oh, no.

I peered into a microscope.

I watched a drop of water and saw all of you swarming in it,

and I watched for such a long time, and I bent so close

to take it all in,

it finally took me in, and I became a swarming microbe myself,

one of you. There, above us, like the vault of the heavens,

the outer coating of a waterdrop covers me —

that light shining above

is not the light, as you all believe it to be,

isn’t the sun, isn’t the Celestial Spheres,

but it's the lens of my microscope, I'm not sure
that someone's peering through it
since I'm not there. . . .”

“Ridiculous,” Lorenzo burps,
stuffing his mouth with macaroni —
“Ridiculous — like everything else
you've been telling me —
although until yesterday I hung on every word —
it's not a bad comparison, but that's all it is —
you don't know how to use a microscope.
What microscope? There was no microscope. . . .”

While I push the lumpy macaroni down
my throat with a pleasant expression —
so Lola won't notice that it's lumpy —
the muscles of my face stiffen,
for I feel that this is Lorenzo's last visit,
he loathes me so much for helping him,
now he's obliged to be grateful,
and I know it,
and he knows I know it,
the only thing he can do is hurt me
by accusing me of hurting him,
if someone has to feel guilty
it's better for him that I should bear the guilt.

After supper I stand up
and notice an envelope,
it was delivered by someone in a uniform,
either I pay more money than I now possess
or I spend some time in jail.
Yes, I have to earn more money,
money, more than I now have,
my debts increase month by month,
somehow I can't get on top,
I can't return to

rooming houses with cheap furniture,
lacking in music, colour,
love,
I'm not twenty any more, like Lorenzo.

I dial my wife's number . . .
she picks up the receiver,
I hear her giggle then a pause and then
she says: Hello,
sitting beside her, most likely, is her friend
who like a modest little worm
has wiggled himself into our life,
nudging me out . . .
when she hears my voice,
she gets rattled and often shouts,
but all I want is the address
of Mr. and Mrs. McIntosh
because with their help I could now
co-author a book that would become a bestseller . . .
for ten minutes we talk around the point
until finally I ask her for the address,
she promises,
but before finishing her sentence she forgets,
I hear it in her voice,
she always promises,
she always forgets,
and I always decide
I won't ask her anything anymore,
but I always forget too.

I drive Lorenzo home,
we both open our windows,
the exhaust pipe of my car, eaten by rust,
is exhausted from all the carbon monoxide . . .
when I drive I have a choice:
either I sit in the stifling warmth
or my hand and face are sliced to pieces

by the sharp air
from the side windows.

An upset, humiliated little boy, I sit
beside Lorenzo's telephone
and call Ludmilla who five days ago
twined her legs and mine together on a narrow bed,
and tried to get my word that I would come the next day too
to play chords on her shivering ribs.
The next day I didn't show up,
and now I'm calling her for the first time, afraid of punishment,
for I need someone to sit in my car
to wait for me while inside I talk with those wearing uniforms,
to wait for me and fill me with strength by waiting for me —

Ludmilla's words pelt me like small, hard
hailstones,
she still remembers me,
doesn't really understand what I'm afraid of,
doesn't say she wants to see me again,
doesn't ask me why I didn't show up for five days,
asks me to hang up and let her sleep.

I step inside the building
I might not step out of again
for twenty-four hours,
a broad-faced, wide-eyed, deep-voiced
man in uniform asks me questions, patiently.
“No, I didn't come to pay,
I moved.”
“Yes, my wife got the summons
when I was in Europe.”
“No, she isn't with me,
I moved out.”
“No, not to Europe, I spent my holiday there,
and had no idea what was happening here.”
“Oh, yes, my wife still lives there. . . .”

The big, wide eyes
blink before the sharp edges of these oddly shaped facts,
nothing is “yes,”
nothing is “no,”
everything is “perhaps” or “but” or “on the other hand,”
he glances at his watch and says, “Come back tomorrow,”
before he gets completely confused,
“but not here, go to the head office please
and explain everything to the man with three stripes
on his shoulder.”

I drive down to the university library,
the girl librarian smiles at me, she knows me,
I know her too, but from where I can't recall,
anyway I talk to her as if I were a scholar and a gentleman,
she has never heard of the book
I want to take out —
In endless rows the card catalogues
stand stiffly against the wall,
Aba Cir Elf Hud Kon . . . Nim,
no writer is listed there whose name begins with the letter M.
“Miss, I'm afraid I can't find Mendolini.”
“Of course you can't find him,” she replies with a smile,
“M is the thirteenth letter of the alphabet
and people are superstitious around here. . . .”
I stare in front of me, seeing nothing —
if I wrote a 160-page
essay on Mendolini, then maybe
in two years I might be able to get away from the two wheels
that squeak G and F-sharp respectively,
if I knew that there were only two years to go,
it would be easier to bear the dissonance
that enters my ears and invades my brain,
but there's no letter M,
and I don't know what to do,
the girl librarian looks at me, smiling,
finally I hear myself asking her:

“We’ve met somewhere, haven’t we, but where?”

“Oh, don’t you remember?”

At the attorney’s office,
you went there about a patent,
then you invited me to go to a movie,
but I didn’t go
because I was engaged —
but he’s left me now and I’m all alone.”

Now I remember,
I tried to patent an idea once.
“Fantastic,” the attorney said,
“with only five thousand, within a year,
you can make fifty thousand,
it’s really amazing nobody ever thought of it before —
couldn’t be simpler.”

The girl smiles at me:
“Do you still like going to the movies?” she asks,
I see her lovely legs and think
how on earth can I lay my hands on \$5,000 —
and as I stagger out of the library I see her,
out of the corner of my eyes, reproaching me bitterly.

On the street the trees are bent over
greedily lapping up the muddy water in the gutters —
the moon, holding two clouds over its head like fists,
circles and dances, twirls and sings —
one after the other windows light up
to keep an eye on me as I walk, then they blink out —
alcoholics pass by me
with my head on their shoulders —
oh, yes, I feel decidedly
that around my head there is the outer coating
of a waterdrop about to burst, if I stretch
it will burst all around me!
I stretch — and stand behind the microscope,

two of us are working in the room,
there's no chair — so we have to stand —
and keep an eye on the corridor, for if they come,
we have to rub our eyes as if they have grown tired
from the strain of watching,
this should please whoever comes down the corridor,
but no one ever comes.

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