

The Beginning

The facts are obvious, contradictory, coarse. . . And blaring, I leave the facts, like a mound of giant stones, to those who busy themselves with important matters. What interests me is the murmur among them. Indistinct, obsessive. . . Digging through the rock pile of facts, I'm after a handful of truths — or what used to be called that, these days it doesn't have a name. Lured on by a flickering light, what if I were to dive deeper and deeper, if I could reach the bottom and make it back — I'm after a handful of sand, the song of

the sand that slips through my fingers and disappears. "Those who speak of the shadow, speak the truth." Truth speaks through shadows. Today, I will speak of the stone building, the one that the narrative has avoided at all costs, or at least kept at a safe distance, looking out at it from behind words. Constructed long before I was born, it's five stories tall, if we don't count the basement, and there are steps leading up to the entrance.

One must write with the body, with the naked defenseless body beneath the skin. . . Yet, words only call out to other words. You take the letters "L" and "F," a couple of vowels, "I" and "E," and you write: LIFE. The only key is not to confuse the order. Misplace a letter and you turn the living clay into simple inert matter — as the legend goes. . . like in the legend. . . Life, as I write it, belongs to those who can grab it, with a deep sigh, not with a mere breath. Like plucking a fruit from its branch, a root from the earth. . . As for you, what's left is but an echo, like the hum of waves that you hear when you hold an empty shell to your ear. Life: a word imbibed and consumed down to its very marrow; the hum of a wave of quiet grief, an oceanful of waves.

A young boy once said, "Better to outdare life before it outdares you." He was a reckless soul, a cross of one kind of darkness with another, he had come to know the stone building too early in life. He was never afraid again, either because he remembered that first fear forever or because he forgot it altogether. . . Ever since, they say, he laughs for no apparent reason.

Suppose, on the street leading to the stone building, there's a coffeehouse, and in front of it, winter or summer, a man. (Inside the building, a vast courtyard, surrounding the courtyard, staircases with wire mesh reaching high overhead. . . To keep people from jumping. Because for the past century or two, human life has become too precious to be hurled against the stones. And outside the building, spiraling up to the fifth floor, is a fire escape. At night, under the pale moonlight, shadows appear, climbing up the stairs, but, to this day, no one has been seen climbing down.) The man, like a relic from some forgotten era, is always there, on the sidewalk. . . When he can find them, he sits on newspapers, cartons, cardboard boxes. Around him, you can see empty bottles, food scraps, vomit, puddles of piss. His face, divided into uneven halves by

a deep scar, as pitted as the surface of the moon, reveals nothing, not even his age. Still, if you follow the scar like a mountain path over his battered skull, you will arrive at the melancholy hollows of his eyes and find yourself standing at the edge of an abyss. One that speaks not in a human tongue but in that of the wind, moonlight, and rocks. Because you cannot dare ask for his name, you assign to him the first letter of the alphabet: A.

The coffeehouse regulars lead such simple, ordinary lives that any attempt to describe them ends up sounding artificial, forced, exaggerated. In any case, no one here talks about himself much, and even if he did, nobody would listen. Although they've had more than their share of calamity, failure, and humiliation, the regulars still believe that humans are naturally good, though they can't quite explain why there is so much evil on this earth. Each one, in his own way, has come to grips with life — with poverty, with privations, with disappointments called "life." By clenching their fists, by cursing, by humoring each other, by stealing, struggling, and above all, simply by making do. . . Truth be told, they don't have many options. Still, even Hell isn't so bad all the time — even in Hell

there's a cup of tea, a corner one can claim as one's own, a friendly gesture, a smile, a familiar song.

Suppose there's a nameless bar across from the coffeehouse where only an exclusive few are allowed entry, where experienced bouncers stand at the door until dawn, showing the drunks and troublemakers to their taxicabs. For the bar's regulars, the lives across the street are stories they'd like to tell one day. Each time they begin inventing a human story. . . (isn't the art of story-telling, in a way, the art of stirring coals without burning your fingers?). . . it leaves behind the bitter taste of death. When they grow weary of this rotten system — the heap of filth that passes for a system — and of the clockwork labyrinths of their souls, they look outward with one final hope. Past their own reflection on the bright window, to the shadowy, silent, indistinct alleyways. . . the courtyards, coal cellars, tunnels, secret passageways where the ghost of freedom roams, rattling its chains. . . They walk as if the streets belong to them, with noisy footsteps, leaving deep footprints, going up and down stairwells swept clean by others. Sometimes they feel entitled to what they desire; at other times, they enjoy the privilege of cruelty, so long as it's not overdone.

After all, who would turn down a life of adventure and strife? Besides, they've paid a princely sum, endured plenty of loss. They've never hesitated before coming to blows, fighting the fight, looking danger in the eye. They've spoken out — with giant capital-letter words in which they could see their own reflection — yet they've expected nothing in return from the indifferent world. When they've had their fill of despair, of stories, crimes, sins, confessions — each one the same as any other — they leave the back alleys behind and revert to their destiny, picking up where they left off. To invent the hell of human freedom — moving beyond good and evil. . . far from absolute good and absolute evil, in the comforting safety of mediocrity. . . After all, every human life is a defeat, but some defeats are more spectacular than others.

Those at the coffeehouse know this hell intimately, even if they don't give it a name. . . "Freedom" reminds them of a yard fenced with wire mesh. As for being "human". . . Isn't one born a "human" with the sound of the very first cry? Still, it's difficult to bear being human, even more difficult to be no more than that.

As for A. . . No one notices him. He lies in front of the window like an empty sack, as he does in front

of every door the world slams in his face. The streets belong to him, but he goes nowhere. As if he's captivated by something inside — maybe the stove, or the TV. . . Something he has worn out by staring at it. . . The dirty window reflects back a picture of his existence. Tainted, very tainted. . . His existence is a long poem about being human.

Sometimes, what little life is left in him, that tiny spark, blazes unexpectedly, and turns into an outburst of dark laughter. Wave after wave of uncontrollable laughter making him keel over in convulsions; he manages to raise himself, but, unable to stop, keeps on laughing. The hazy halo of madness can't protect him from cold, pain, hard knocks, but it does protect him from the earliest memories of the stone building. He is known to laugh even when he gets a beating, as if he hasn't cried since the day he was born. (After all, sadness is a luxury not everyone can afford.) He makes no attempt to understand the world — I think I try to do that for him. He doesn't get angry either. . . He is in the world like a sponge thrown into dirty water. And the world is in him. . . Caught in his gaze, it wastes away, is hollowed out, turns to simple clay. Well, what is this thing called "life," other than

a murky image on the windowpane! Tainted, very tainted, a long poem on nothingness. Speak a little A., withhold your shadow from the words. Give them enough shadow, make them speak the whole truth with the weight of shadows!

I will now defer my laughter and take you to the stone building. When you turn the corner, you'll think you have come to a dead end but the path curves left just in front of the stairs. You will stop there and bid farewell to the world of humans. The path that brings you here will never take you back. Inside, lights are on, day and night; in the stark, ruthless light, all forms — inanimate or human — and their shadows become equal. A fate summarized in a few sentences ends up being the succinct answer one gives to all possible questions. A confession. A confession extracted every hour on the hour. Human: the oldest riddle, matter that speaks.

I loved somebody once. He left his eyes with me. Since he had no one else to leave them with. Love. A word I found by digging through what spills over from the heart, through so much darkness. Nobody had told me "Everyone kills the one they love"! We were together at the stone building. I listened to the

voices, listened and waited. When it was my turn, the sun had not yet risen.

You don't believe me, you think I saw the stone building in my dreams, don't you? But aren't we all created from the yeast of dreams? Sooner or later, the day breaks, blood-red streaks appear on the eastern horizon. . . Stars harden in the taut, motionless sky, dispersing one by one into the unseen. The last star lets a rope down, toward us, so that the silent night, the slit and bloodied words, the dispossessed shadows, the impassioned, unwanted dreams, the winged dead, might grab onto it and climb up. . . so that all the dreams that came to live among us and left without goodbyes, might climb to the furthest reaches of the sky where everyone and everything disappears. . .

You don't hear me, do you? Perhaps I shouldn't have told this story in the past tense. I began the song in the wrong place again, and in the wrong key.