

Le Laboureur

A lot of noise in the background: chairs are moving, laughter, glasses tinkle, a lot of smoke. It annoyed him to be here, but it was his last resort. At home he became depressed by the filthy white walls without any decoration and the ceiling radiating an almost grey shine. The floor was covered with a dark hairy carpet and only the look of it made his longos squeeze together. He woke up, saw the ceiling, then the walls and finally the carpet. He perceived this together with the smell of his unwashed body and the damp sense of his bedclothes. He grabbed some garments and left the room immediately. In the meanwhile he felt how a big lump formed and nestled in his throat, pushing his mood towards an unknown depth. Where to go to avoid this unbearable feeling?

He ended up in the bar on the corner of his street. On more harmonically planned Saturdays and Sundays he would go there to read his newspaper, have coffee and smoke some cigarettes. In this bar everybody always drank beer. Any time in the day the same cluster of people sat by the counter. It was impossible to recognize the bartender among them, since they were used to tap their own beer and to help out when there was a lot to do. He found himself in this strange position between a stranger and a friend. Since he visited the bar so much, they started to recognize him as the silent guy sitting most of the time by himself faking to read the newspaper attentively. But on other days, when he needed some recognition, he would go to the counter and sit there with the habitués to have a chat.

As he entered, one of these guys gave him a firm look. He immediately thought he had trespassed an other boarder he wasn't aware of. He didn't want to quarrel. Actually all he did lately was trying to avoid any sort of fight whatsoever. The Guy didn't seem very reliable. He sat on a bar stool in a corner, leaning with his back on the wall. His grey hair stuck on his forehead, although it was not particularly warm. He wore greasy glasses, making his little eyes even more unreachable. His enormous belly was covered with a blue grey sort of shirt, crammed in his trousers. The buttons could hardly bare the tension and between them you could see tiny bits of white skin flashing out. His hand was holding a glass of beer that was magically always full or half empty. He drank very fast but the alcohol didn't seem to touch him.

The Guy felt his anxiety but the look was meant as an invitation and they started to talk. Most of the time these chats didn't exceed the usual good or bad weather report, but this time the Guy asked him

how he was doing. Almost without thinking he answered he was doing fine. Immediately he felt the formality of this sentence, the politeness of an education that taught him not to complain. But the Guy kept on insisting, so he told him the reason of his regular appearance. The fact that there was nothing out there to keep him home. He lost his ability to look at his life from a distance, make plans, felt motivation to act. Now he couldn't theorize it any longer, he was in the middle of it and he had no idea how to deal with this. There was too much to desire and he was left with no desire at all anymore. So what was next? What would leave him from living a silent life and die without necessity? He was seriously troubled by this question what use life had at all, except from making sure your family name would survive through time. But at the same moment he felt the luxury in the possibility to stand still and pose this question. He had nothing else to do than to think about this over and over again. The futility of his life and his compromising position to it evoked an impossibility to escape. This situation not only blocked his mind but also his actions and it left him with feelings of despair, rage and frustration. The pointlessness of his thoughts increased the intensity of these emotions to such an extent that it became impossible to deny. He was shocked to find himself telling all this to the Guy. Together with the awareness of the fire of his monologue a feeling of shame came dripping in. After a while silence occurred. He didn't want to look the Guy in the eyes. He felt the heat of his thoughts crawling through his brain without making sense anymore. He didn't even try to catch them any longer. He just left them, swarming around like blind tadpoles.

It seemed as if the Guy had something to tell him. He started moving nervously on his bar stool, his back no longer leaning on the wall. After a pull of his beer and a look through his filthy glasses, he started to tell about an Artist in Mexico City, who had been, during nine hours, pushing a big ice cube through its streets. In the beginning the Artist put all his effort in pushing the heavy thick ice cube over the uneven pavement. After some time the Artist had to protect the ice cube from breaking in half, when going over a boarder or some stairs. The ice became thinner and thinner and turned slowly into the size of a small cobblestone. In the end the labour became a relaxing walk, where the Artist kicked the piece of ice in front of his feet, until it diminished in some drops of water. The ice cube didn't have the chance to fulfil its task and the Artist put his energy into a process that in the end just evaporated in the air. Somehow it all seemed to have a purpose, even when it was only by its possibility of existence. Silence fell in. The Guy reached for his beer, drank long and slow, put the glass on the counter and leaned back on the wall. The storytelling had speeded up the pulsation of his belly. He could tell the Guy told him the story with a reason, even though it seemed nothing really happened in it.

He felt the impatient look of the Guy and his disappointment soon after, when it became clear his story found no real reaction. The narrative didn't seem to allow him to analyse it step by step. When he tried to figure out what he got from the story, he was surprised by the impossibility to catch the thoughts it evoked. In his head he went over the elements again and it appeared even more abstract to him than before. In the meanwhile he felt the anger coming back, since the story left him with even more chaos in his mind. Instead of giving him an exit, it only seemed to make things more complicated. He didn't have the belief to see the essence of it at that moment. He thanked the Guy again, put some money on the table, and left the bar with his head spinning around like a hurricane.

The Guy followed him with his eyes when he left the café and walked in the direction of his house. After a while the Guy also took his jacket and went home, to his old mother, waddling on his way, his brains covered with a thick mist. As the Guy strolled down the street, in his head he saw the Artist walking with him, before he left him for that day. At home the Guy sank in his chair and while he closed his eyes, he thought about the future days he would spend in the café. Like everyday he would order spaghetti and prepare himself for leaving his steady place by the counter to eat at one of the brown sticky tables. Similar to the place by the counter, this one was also chosen very strategically. From that point he could see everyone come in and he had an eye on the bartender who knew, by only a blink in the eye, when to give him a new beer. From this day the Guy would wait to see him again. When he came wandering in looking pale and with dark pouches under his eyes, the Guy looked at him and he saw a twinkle of shame that immediately got extinguished by indifference. The Guy recognized the symptoms and knew his resignation would not take much time anymore. The discrepancy of activity and lethargy almost came to an end. The body was tired, and the mind would follow soon. Gravity lost its control on the water drop and the Artist returned home.

Alan Quireyns