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Fragment

The Year of the Plague

“When will we stop living side by side with tragedy,” a woman wondered, reading a local newspaper; the question was an echo of the protesting voices heard claiming, pleading for a prompt and effective solution to the chaotic situation.

The ghost of the plague; the chronicles and news reports published during the epidemic; the studies trying to shed some light on the situation, pretending to explain to the readers the origins, reasons, causes and possible consequences; the fears and terrors of a community living under uncertainty, weighed down by the facts and events of a fate more dangerous day by day--all these showed that destiny was uncertain for everyone, that each and all of them could become victims –or murderers.

The streets –either wastelands or battlefields- forced people to take precautions of the sort taken prescribed before a cyclone. Masses of housewives, trying to protect their domestic economies with the sensible and calculated foresight honed during years of managing their families, did not hesitate to sack the grocer shops, settling their nerves before what they expected would be a long hibernation while the plague died down. Many people moved to cellars, abandoning the upper levels of buildings, and in darkness and silence they found a temporary shelter, a charm against doom. For those who lived, or tried to live, along with tragedy, their work revealed that one and the same uncertainty covered their world and the underground world of gophers settled in the foundations of houses. Buildings had their windows protected, from top to bottom, by meters of sticky tape that prevented the glass from the breaking and cracking when hit by a gust of the air penetrating offices or bedrooms where sleepers peacefully slept, unleashing fatal accidents or certain deaths. In some buildings of the city, considered long ago as aristocratic symbols of a place where noblemen did not honor the apparent beauty and grace of their caste, the view was even more desolate as fragility showed its power in a reign that long had been thought invulnerable. Ivy bushes climbed happily on walls, and the hinges of iron fences creaked as an echo of the moans and laments of their owners. The streets in front of such mansions were occupied by a static procession of cars that rotted slowly under the caress of merciless rust; the pressure of thick air deflated the tires, giving them the appearance of resigned beings facing their fate, slanting, bending the iron pieces of their useless carcasses. Inside those cars, like ghosts haunting passers-by, dark silhouettes similarly decayed could be seen. They were beings almost petrified in a motion of constant alert, protecting the well-being of

the sorrowful spirits wandering the mansions' corridors, imagining they lived within a dream.

All of them were suspects. They were infected or could infect any neighbor that approached in the hope of fighting loneliness or terror, which had invaded even the sweetest and quietest of tempers, as if a disease. Psychiatrists, earning outlandish incomes from the misery of their patients in a time of poverty, prolonged artfully their sessions without reaching any conclusion. The children, uncertain and puzzled, faced a future devoid of promise.. At an art exhibition of five-to-twelve-years-olds, the jury declared they were aghast at the puzzling and desperate titles of the drawings. In the section "My country" the children showed a place devastated by deep fears as strange monsters invaded homes. The titles were straightforward: "The happy world where we would like to live does not exist".

Everybody looked after his own welfare and safety, occasionally pitying a neighbor hit by misfortune. But the ability to be oblivious only lasted until a next event, crueller than the previous one, occurred. A journalist--practicing black humor or else trying to make the best out of the situation--stated: "This country is in need of a civil war or a widespread calamity so that the people could join forces together".

An irrational fear? People said, and not without evidence, that this was a war situation, or similar to war, or worse than war. Shocking anecdotes, sensationalistic but false rumors, stories that ran from mouth to mouth, spreading with a dramatic tone that increased each time they were told, all of these contributed to general and growing unrest. Even the theatrical commentary on events that nobody could stand bearing witness to, but which everybody could imagine, left a deeper and longer impression than the everyday account of a newspaper or a news-show. Reality overwhelmed any fantasy, no matter how whimsical or hallucinatory, and it would have sparkled the imagination of any creator of horror adventures.

Every passer-by, without exception, became the likely author of a shuddering story. A legion of writers and journalists, fueled by a touch of amazing and wild imagination, concocted their stories using characters and elements of reality mixed with their own fiction. The audience stood fascinated, eyes wide open, listening to an endless story with all its labyrinthine shades and branches. And on every street corner, in both smart and lowlife cafés, on the mobile stage of a bus, in family gatherings and social events, among groups of ladies gathered to play cards or for a gastronomical soiree, in restaurants where people ate trying not to clink china and silverware, among late-nighters in the insomniac city, in public squares, these authors could be seen surrounded by small groups of people. They excelled in their charming eloquence which scared the wits out of their audience, and swung the rosary of words so artfully strung that nameless terror was turned into something real and concrete.

The authors' extravagance and the talent drew the crowds' attention to the stories, leading to their collection in serials, booklets and expensive books. And some of the writers even managed to end up publishing in newspapers, for a salary which if not guaranteeing a carefree life at least offered a more pleasant one.

The instinct of survival of a community edging towards disaster led to the organizing of rescue groups fighting for “recovery of national dignity.” In the beginning, this solution was much welcomed in the small towns where the plague had broken out, a horrific and fatal epidemic. For a few days, misery was kept at bay with night-long festivities, city carnivals and a party atmosphere that blinded with sparks of hope all those who were priding themselves on bringing back the peace and calm that seemed to have been lost. The last drunk wandering the streets was a chilly wind that blew in gusts, freezing with its breath the explosion of joy. After a short while, it was again terror that became the mark of those commanders, officials and foot soldiers in the rescue armies that only benefited their members and owners. The solution was then distorted, manipulated and bent to the advantage of the people interested in the perpetuation of the epidemic.

The stench that floated in the air, and the vague trace of a rotten smell unsettled the crowd of correspondents sent by news agencies. The news of the plague was front page material in all the newspapers of the prestigious economic empires; the stories inspired through the dangerous undertaking and risk to the correspondents’ lives, and impressed with the spectacular account of the tragedy.

“This time and moment will be remembered as a shameful milestone in national history,” stated a passenger boarding a plane to an unknown destination. The discovery of the plague’s spread forced the “local heroes” to escape the approaching threat. Everyone claimed to have the right to tackle their personal fears according to their own whim –whether by flying away, using a new type of volatile toxin, or by searching for a new atmosphere with a healthier, less uncertain environment.

No one, then, had the answer to the question of how to live a day-to-day life with plague, with disease, with death.

If dreams could carry me to her

–Fragment

After walking a few blocks we came across a restaurant that mingled in its name –and in its dishes-- the careful tradition of a delicious cuisine and the vertigo arising in the customers’ hunger.

“Chungking Express” I read, eyeing the menu and its delicacies, listening to the continuous splatter of frying in harmony with the clatter of pans, the rhythmic chopping of knives and the unintelligible phrases screamed back there, in a kitchen where noise was an ingredient of the flavor –and the taste- that filled our mouths.

The treasury chest was flung open, offering us fried dishes, fish and vegetables, all brought by a waiter who considered my Japanese friend a brother.

I imagined a long hug, an exclamation of joy, maybe a happy encounter that would lessen the home -sickness, if only I had said: “My friend cannot speak and he’s just arrived from abroad”. But I was so hungry I did not want to distract myself by lapsing into the vain effort of a dull dialogue, bound to lead to boredom since I did not speak their language.

“Let them play”, I thought, and swallowed not only the last bite of my “Made in Hong Kong” lunch but my taste for jokes. My Japanese friend had told me, months ago, that he was chasing a girl from Shanghai, Xi’an or Beijing, a place that I took to be distant, perhaps because I had never thought of going there, or because it was a city that did not spark any excitement in me, or because in contrast to him I was not moved by the idea of a love affair forcing me to go to that distant part of the world—at least that’s what I thought. I remember him moving, easily but inexplicably, from reading texts on Nazi horrors –which to him explained mankind’s barbarism- to softer, lighter texts on Zen and Tao and the ancestral traditions of the girl with whom he was obsessed, leading him to study Chinese or perhaps one of its dialects, the one she spoke. And there he was, my Japanese friend, chatting and yammering with an overjoyed waiter, sparing us a moment and letting us forget the merciless silence that the world of words forces upon us when gestures are but poor caricatures of comprehension. Eyes tinged with sadness, the waiter bid us farewell and reentered the rhythms of the restaurant.

“What language were you in?” I asked, sipping tea.

“Mandarin,” he replied, downplaying the accomplishment.

“Is it difficult?”

“So-so”, he explained without fuss. I used the pleasant aftertaste of the Far Eastern lunch as a bridge to go return the conversation to his Asian love affair.

“And the girl? Did you ever hear from her again?”

I had overwhelmed him, and he did not seem to like that. He pondered the question, drew and re-drew circle on the table with a crooked-looking finger. Then he broke a cookie that expelled a piece of paper announcing good fortune, and said:

“She never wrote back.”

I felt sorry for him and tried to erase my mistake.

“Well” I said, “at least you learned Mandarin...”

“Yes”, he replied, faking laughter and making my soul return to my body. “And it’s a difficult one!”

“I guess so.”

On our way out, with a promise to return and after having shaken hands with Kar-Wai –Wong Kar-wai was the full name of the young waiter with the broad smile that, as my Japanese friend said, almost sliced his face in two—I looked at the fortune borne by the paper slip inside the cookie. Mine said whatever. My friend’s read, literally: “Prayers are heard... The woman you dream of is near”.

“The woman you dream of,” I repeated aloud. “What a joke!”

A memory, that of the woman I dreamed of, was a part of my history, of a past that brought to me the image of a fragile body -a loving body, described in terms with caring certainty-, that vanished, making me lose my breath, feel abandoned.

With the passing of time, of anger and of disappointment, I felt secure living in a loneliness that was a kind of tribute to her and that allowed me to stay by her side with uncorrupted faithfulness. My hope relied on cinema, film's illusion, the sense of anticipating among its shadows the presence of that woman, the consolation of her hand, ever present in my dreams.

On Writing

It is not a sentence made to dazzle marble,
But when it was written,
The meek passion of its words,
Was enough for a reader, once moved,
To remember the woman who drew with her hand on the paper:
"I'll be back soon. I love you."
Maybe its simple eloquence
Matters more than other messages,
Carefully thought, polished to remain in time,
But buried, despite all, in oblivion.

30-VIII-1996

From *Images of a Journey*

Images of a Journey

The train moves like a merciless animal,
like a wounded or restless beast,
while your hand rises in the air, swinging,
and becomes part of a remembrance that touches the memory.
I know you are there, and I know your face shines
beyond the deceptive brightness of two eyes celebrating sorrow.
and I leave and the train moves, carrying me in its belly,
and I get a glimpse of your motion in the air,
stressing and mirroring my expression, so eloquent,
and perhaps so lonely,
consoling me under the shadow of you image:
strange-looking while I move
--while she moves in the distance--
with her music and her echo in my memory,
a clear, precise music that evokes other shadow:
that of doubt or loneliness.
So, your ghost haunts
the emptiness of that train coach where I am writing,
and celebrates the next sacred reunion,
the ritual that will take place when I see my hand
suspended, now, right before touching your hand.
Another motion that, in time, will become another remembrance,
And its presence will touch memory too.

18-IV-92

At Bardwell's Farm

Each year I visit Bardwell's house in Hatfield, Massachusetts,
When fall's veil paints on landscape
The farewell that summer draws on each tree.
Built in the eighteenth century,
Its wood has preserved the memory of years
And of its generations.
Sitting on the terrace
I see the girls
Jogging every afternoon, like delicate deer
While their hockey sticks rise up their necks and dance;
I see the adornments too,
The red clay monkeys hooked by their tails,
The metallic cricket which listens to its brothers whistling, hidden in the grass,
The bamboo bells melodic in the wind.
Everything conveys the rumor of pleasant harmony.
Even the crow's caw
Announcing the end of the day,
Moving in the distance
And vanishing in the shadows.
It is only a silhouette
Remaining in memory,
Just like this house in time,
And in the journey that time means.

18-IX-2000
