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A text and two poems (in plural translations)

The Day of Departure

The wise man never gives up his independence. Even in the middle of a severe storm he behaves as a vir fortis, solid and tenacious in his purpose. His words may seem contradictory to the ears of others and upon his pathway he will hear, without losing the tranquility of his soul, the pedants call him a madman.

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Seneca

The details of the death of a man are always disturbing. And that is because they remind other men of their own death and reveal some general outlines of how our common futures will appear to us. But these details are useful because they preserve the intensity of those last moments where everything happens for the final time. A gesture, a glance, a word... one would say that the certainty of departure enhances the value of life and produces in the soul of those who have yet to die a profound impact, the mark of an indelible seal that says: "I also will be one who dies today, I also will be Seneca."

I

In the morning Seneca had received the order to commit suicide, and his courageous wife Pompea Paulina reads aloud a piece of writing that her husband had finished long ago. The day passes normally and everything breathes a luminous serenity. Everything, except for a slight tremor on the lips of the philosopher. His hair has turned gray but his vitality is intact as befits a child of sunny Hispania. Lucio Anneo has endured a barrage of accusations prompted by his excessive wealth; he has resisted the temptation of many conspiracies - except this one; he has withstood the arrogance of the Greek counselors and the countless Roman orators. His heart knows what exile is, as well as the scorn and the solitude. He has not lost his courage, and in his soul still sails that noble lady, intelligence, in the midst of this overwhelming misfortune, a product of impotence.

However, he feels fear. Fear is powerful and moves alone, dragging everything with it. When life is lost, all men are the same: they can pretend courage, but they cannot feel it. Courage is only for the living. A few hours more and everything will be over. Pison's conspiracy failed, and it is time for tribute in blood. Natal and Escevinus confessed. Later, Lucan, Quintianus and Senecionus. All the others were discovered. Only the freed woman, the incredible Epicarnis, was able to endure the torture without denouncing the others: this is not unusual. The greatest achievements in human resistance have been accomplished by women!

It is the day of the departure. Everybody knows that the Cordovan sage is not a conspirator, but they also know that for many years Caesar has hated him and has decided to get rid of him. A tribune arrived at the villa, located four miles from the city, to notify him of the imminence of his own death. Seneca would have preferred to have time to decide this for himself. But one is always too late when you are a vassal. And the world will not turn well while the sages are at the service of imbeciles.

II

The water that flows through the courtyard calms Seneca's unease. The memory of his wealth, donated to Nero to allege a fidelity that nobody could believe, will torment others; it is time to freely breathe the air of the countryside and to say goodbye to the pleasures that the wide fountains of the world provide in abundance. It is time to bathe in the hot springs and to taste subtle and unknown delicacies. It is time to

chew opium, brought from mysterious mountains far in the East. All the sensual luxury and the colors of the coffered ceilings make sense only to the man who does not know the exact date and time of his death.

In one way or another, fear turns into sorrow, anguish into disappointment, and pain is gone probably forever. "If all men had the opportunity to die often, there would be none who were not wise." The broad window of the villa's large study lets a slight breeze pass through and caress the face of this sixty-year-old man. "How should I kill myself?" His wife answers him, "pour the vase of your blood so that it might fertilize the earth. Perhaps it will join the Tiber and reach the sea. It may be that a few drops get to Hispania." Then she cried, as deeply as only one who is going to lose the most adored being in the world can do. Pompea Paulina loved Seneca, and love always suffers an inevitable absence.

"Where, then, are the precepts of wisdom; where is the ability, prepared with the discourse of so many years, to oppose any accident and imminent danger?" asks again the one who no longer requires a response. Sincere serenity is a fruit of detachment that he is far from possessing; he is not asking because he sees the falling tears of his wife nor because he intends to teach something to his most faithful disciples. Seneca asks because in him everything refuses to die, everything wants to continue on. He is surprised at the strength of his foolish hope, the same hope that wants to conceive new projects and to convince Estacio Anneo to plant one of his fields with delicate seasonal fruit, as he dreamt last night. Today, after long years of waiting, is the last day, a day of farewell; it is the only overwhelmingly real day in the life of all men.

III

Rome is a nest of vipers: as soon as fortune has smiled on someone, an army of petty and jealous people swoops down on him. For many years Seneca has lived in Rome, and his origin in the province has not been an obstacle to the rise of his fame and growth of his fortune. However, the shadow of Caesar's jealousy has hovered over his head, and there are many who hate him and who are pleased with his misfortune. One of them, a freedman of the Caesar, Acrato, plunderer of temples and thief of sacred images and whose sacrilegious gaze has settled shamelessly on the bodies of the vestals, has dedicated himself to publicly discrediting him, hoping to speed up his death. Every despicable man diligently seeks a victim on which to unburden his sins. Just like Acrato, many other gratuitous enemies have stalked him for some time, waiting in the shadows to sink their claws into the flesh of the Cordovan. Hiding has been useless; they have searched for him in his place of retirement to let him know that they are there and that they will not leave him in peace.

Misfortune has not fallen suddenly on the man who has written so much about the resolve of the spirit. Every strike has been accompanied by another; each arrow by another arrow. Slowly, the patch of sky that remains for Seneca has become a shred of darkness. Fortunately, this time will be the last. Tomorrow those who suffer for hating him will finally rest, just as he will rest. None of this will disturb History.

The world's own vanity and the lack of reason that governs it demonstrate once more that the philosopher is right when he contemns logic as "not fitted for wisdom," and subjects it to frequent and pointed taunts. Life is a disordered set of impulses and fits of destiny. Some more straightforward, others more twisted; there is no intellect that comprehends them nor mind that can encompass them. If a sensible man is not devoted to expecting everything at the hands of luck, he will be losing inexorably his good judgement. Seneca realizes everything that is happening, but he cannot govern the forces that are dragging him toward death; the only thing he can do is try not to rebel in vain. And he does not rebel.

IV

Pompea Paulina wants, along with her husband, to kill herself. She has said so and he hasn't stopped her. With the solemnity of everyday things, when they are being done for the last time, the slaves prepare a hot bath for their master. When everything is ready, Seneca lowers his eyes towards the sharp blade that will certainly and peacefully drain his body's blood. He has chosen this way of dying, because it ensures that he will be able to contemplate his own death and that he will see it coming slowly, like discerning a ship in the distance.

After a moment of hesitation - which is necessary so that body and mind can prepare for the arrival of the inevitable - Seneca grasps the weapon and observes that his wife does so too. Looking calmly at his veins he makes a deep incision on his left wrist. The first drop of blood is for the weapon, the others will be swallowed by the earth with the same avidity with which it absorbs the torrential rains of spring. Pompea Paulina is bleeding, just like him. Vision becomes murky as one tries to describe that which one sees. A languid heaviness takes hold of every muscle, of every movement, of every impulse to breathe. Death does its simple and eternal work. The same work that it has done perpetually. Despite this, Seneca feels that his slim and old body responds slowly to this last calling. The veins tend to constrict and the blood they contain is unable to deviate from its course. The inertia of life aspires to challenge death, just like we see the opening and closing mouth of a decapitated snake or the trembling leg that has been cut in the battle. Seneca asks for help from one of his friends to hasten the work of death. The anguish of not wanting to die gives way to the impatience of dying soon. Pain is useless when it is definitive.

Lucio Anneo convinces Seneca's wife to withdraw to an adjoining room. No one makes a sound. The duel has started long before the final hour. The sun seeks to hide itself and a fresh wind blows from the sea. On evenings like this it was a delight to walk through flowering groves, thinking of projects and nurturing hopes. The tragic mask has fallen and having patience is the only thing that remains. There is nothing that does not arrive; the question is the duration of the interval.

V

Caesar is a double-dealer. He embraces and kisses him who he has ordered to be stabbed. The origin of his soul is dark, and in his subdued eyes one can perceive the hardness which characterizes the cruel, and the weakness that reveals the fainthearted. Since childhood, his spirit has abounded in contradiction. He is not a bad poet or a bad ruler. However, he is not a good son or a good brother. As a man he is much less than a Cato or a Pompey. Vain and vulgar, he has earned the contempt of his people. But, to tell the truth, he is not much worse than any of his own soldiers; he is merely an ordinary man situated in an extraordinary place. His many crimes are as equally due to laziness as to perversity. In the past, others have been much worse than he, but they have not lasted as long in command. If Nero holds on to the power, it is because the gods want it so. Questioning the motives that they might have in doing so is a useless task.

Caesar's aversion to Seneca is prompted by the anger that the wisdom of others produces in him, and to the disdain that his spirit feels. One can only hate that which represents what we are not, that which we cannot be. But Nero has the swords, the legions, the wealth, and stupidity on his side, and there is not a single corner of the world that those things cannot conquer. Virtue represented by a man, moral authority, or clarity are very fragile shields to protect oneself from the yoke of ignorance. Ignorance is murderous and kills naively, awkwardly. It forces the ingratiating Caesar to forget that his tutor and teacher devoted many years to laying the foundations of his spirit and that he saw him smile, when he was a child, at the discovery of his first letters and at the early emergence of his knowledge. This Cordovan, professor of Rhetoric and Law, Gymnastics and Philosophy, was once the great window through which the young Nero emerged into a complex and avaricious world. Seneca had to suffer the persecution of Agrippina and lower his head at the arrival of brutality, vulgarity, and intolerance. Resigned to merit power through his virtue, he had to serve as a pedestal to a entire family of scoundrels.

Nothing has changed: today he will do it once again. This will be the last time. Tomorrow the stars will shine in the sky and water will run happily through the fountains.

VI

Today's old man was yesterday's mature man and the young man of a few days before. Seneca, although exhausted, wants to face death lucidly and in high spirits. He does not surrender to the surges of unconsciousness and doesn't want to close all doors; even cowardice has degrees, and his is small: he has

understood that even fear can vanish when having it no longer makes sense. The blood-stained bath dissolves in his eyes as nightmares drift away, at more or less regular intervals. His hands are trembling and, bathed in a cold sweat, he imagines himself traversing an ocean of mist and silence, one of those seas that are carried inside of yourself for years and that are abruptly emptied at the moment of death.

His friend, Estacio Anneo, a great doctor, convinces him to hasten his agony by eating dry poison, similar to Socrates' illustrious hemlock. He swallows it with difficulty, because his soul doesn't want now to perceive anything; he wants, rather, to vomit it all. His heart moves in his chest as if it had acquired feet. With his endearing integrity, Nero's tutor, the tragedian and the orator, the wise and wealthy merchant, reflects sweetly on the errors and ineptitudes of the past. What candor there is in his eyes, while he contemplates himself in his memory as if he were watching another man! He sees his mother reclining on her old chair in his Cordovan house. He sees his father, the strict rhetorician Marco Anneo Seneca, solemnly dedicated to his books. He sees his brothers and cousins; he observes the beautiful horses of his childhood and the Carthaginian sword that he once possessed. He raves magnificently, as if pulled by a fast, beautifully tarred sailing ship, enjoying the favorable winds. All the moments of his life swirl in his head, but they gently come to an end in his spirit. He remembers the distant mysteries, in which he believed he saw the very soul of the world, as attractive and unattainable as that of a wild beast. He remembers old passions and loves worn down by time. He sees himself and has the chance to love himself again intensely. It produces, for his eyes only, the delight and the misfortune of having been Seneca, precisely Seneca, and not someone else.

All this has not been enough to remove the breath from his being and release the soul from his body. Still immersed in his semi-consciousness, he finds himself halfway to the world of the dead. His mind works arduously to realize a solution. One of his slaves, a dark Carthaginian who for many years has been preparing his ablutions with Spanish herbs and essences, carries him to a chamber with a bath of hot water. The boiling and steamy fluid clings to the skin of his servants, while Seneca's voice is heard, "I consecrate this liquor to Jupiter, the liberator." He enters the bath but will not come out again, because the vapor suspends his breath, and his soul begins the transit to Tartarus, deep and dark, to which we are all destined, without exception or pardon.

The soldiers of the tribune prevent the death of Pompea Paulina. The Cordovan's body is burned without rituals, as he had arranged in his codicil. When the news reaches Nero's ears, the Greek counselors smile and the Emperor gestures with a grimace of horror that ends in a laugh. He leaves for a banquet in the outskirts of Rome, carrying under his arm some of the books written by his teacher.

Translated from the Spanish by William F. Blair

Winter Light (1)

Winter light, sweet light, intimate light,
A pure and cool light from the shelter of the
soul.

Return to me from time to time
When I tire of the sun
And the tyranny of the winds,
When I am weary of good health
And the old life that persists in my body.

Translated from the Spanish by William F. Blair

Winter Light (2)

Winter light, a mild light, a private light,
An indifferent and unblemished light in the cave
of my soul.

The return to me of a time in which
This low angle of the sun,
This tyranny of the winds
This invalid of unblemished health
And of some former life persists in my body.

Translated from the Spanish by Mary Jane White

[Below is a translation of "Soldier of Fortune" into English lines, all with **feminine endings**—]

Soldier of Fortune (1)

Troy has fallen,
Achilles is dead.
The cup of glory is broken.
My sword is now in the enemy bastion.
The coins that I won have been lost,
They lie beneath the desert stones.
And now,
I wander through the fields
Hoping to drink the new wine.
My cape, now thread-bare, surrenders
to the weight of time.

I am free. I am naked,
seeing the sun in the sky,
discovering I am alive,
Though I paid a high price.

A wayward soldier of fortune,
Not knowing the camp to which I belonged.
My shadow follows me. I am weary.
Coagulated blood
Forms a crust on my body.
But it does not disgust me.

At night, barely able,
Frozen, lost, motionless
I search through my memories on the ground.
Its dark, dismal, gloomy visage
Cleanses me of my woes and my fear.

My wounds heal slowly.
My tears dry up.
The open sores do not weigh on my chest.
Troubled, I sleep on the ground
With my dead,
Who speak and moan in my dreams
With bitter groans.
But when the day returns I find comfort
And the light blesses me with its fire,
I stare at the holm oaks and beech trees.
The ants course across my body.

I do not know where I will go, if anywhere
ever.
It matters not; later I will know.
Another time will come.

Translation William F. Blair

Soldier of Fortune (2) –feminine endings]

Troy is fallen,
Achilles, a corpse.
Our cup of glory, knocked away.
My sword, a lone bulwark against the enemy.
The spoils of victory, in peril,
Broken stones lie below.
Meanwhile,
Others wander the battlefields
Hope to stumble on fresh wineskins.
My cloak, now frayed, remains on duty
Brought low by the weight of this season.

I am free. Without clothing
I meet the sun in its heaven.
Find myself among the living,
Having paid a high ransom.

A soldier of fortune, wandered away,
I have deserted the side to which I belonged.
My shades pursue me. I grow weary.
Blood congeals
And forms its crust over my body.
Which fails to disgust me.
I am frozen, lost, with no grimace
To stir my remains, now earthen.
Whose surface, dark, sinister, somber
Erodes away my cares and my terror.

My wounds heal slowly,
My tears dry up.
Scars no longer constrict my courage.
I sleep on the earth, restlessly,
With my lifeless companions,
Who talk and complain in my slumber
With their bitter groaning.
Still, with the return of day I find comfort
And the light blesses me with its ardor,
Amazed at the live oaks and cedars.
Ants stream over my body.

There is no anger here, should you visit.
What matters now is obvious:
Another time is upon us.

Translation M. J. White

[Same poem, with freedom to use, as more prevalent in English, words with **masculine endings**.]

Soldier of Fortune (3)

Troy is done,
 Achilles, dead.
 Our cup of glory, spilled.
 My sword, against the enemy, stands alone.
 The spoils of victory again at risk,
 Broken stones lie quiet.
 While
 Others wander the fields
 Hope to stumble on new wine.
 My cloak, now frayed, remains on guard
 And brought low by the passage of time.

I am free. Naked
 I meet the sun in the sky.
 Find myself among these alive,
 I have paid the higher price.

A soldier of fortune, wandered off,
 I have deserted my own side.
 My shades pursue me. I am tired.
 Blood clots
 And forms its crust over my skin.
 I am not undone by this.
 I am frozen, lost, with no threat
 Able now to stir my remains, one with the earth.
 Whose surface, somber, sinister and dark
 Erodes away my cares, my fear.

My wounds slowly heal,
 My tears dry.
 Scars no longer constrict my chest.
 I sleep without rest on the earth,
 With my lifeless friends,
 Who talk and complain in my sleep.
 With their bitter groans.
 Still, I find comfort at daybreak
 When light comes again to bless me with its
 ardor,
 Amazed at these live oaks and cedars.
 Ants stream over me.

Let there be no anger, should you come.
 Everything that matters to us grows clear:
 Here and now are another time.

Translation M. J. White
