

THE THINGS THAT DESERVE TO BE SEEN

What must happen before you raise your eyes? What prodigy, what ruin, what disturbance in the serene architecture of your days? There are stars in mine. There are. There were while you spoke of other lights, other graces, of the gift you found in every creature; there while I, scarcely breathing, awaited the return of your gaze, as one waits at a window for a ship that tarries, tarries, tarries.

You know how to look. There it is: what does not cease, what gnaws in silence, what returns. You find beauty in the corolla blackened by its own decay, in the nacre of an eye death left open, in the slow labor of larvae beneath the spent skin of a fruit. You bend close. You linger. Even there you find delicacy; even where another would turn away, you retain a form, a grace, a gleam. Nothing so debased it does not merit your attention; nothing so ruined you cannot gather beauty from it. Then you look at me. Then you ask something. Then the day goes on.

And the stars persist in my eyes.

Others have noticed them. A stranger turned his head; someone wished to portray me; someone, from a land whose winter I do not know, wrote of me, of what my hands had made. I kept their words. I laid them before your silence, one beside another, with the useless care of one adorning an abandoned altar. They were not enough. I brought more. Nor were those. Then I tried to remember their faces. One by one: where they stood, what they said, how their lips moved in saying it. I questioned them in memory until their features began to yield. Had that been the voice? Had those been the exact words? The more I needed to recover them, the less intact they returned.

Tell me. You, who can distinguish a light even among the remains, tell me there was someone. That stranger stopped; that hand wished to portray me; the words I keep were written by a hand other than mine. I have reread them. Checked the signatures, the dates, the slant of every letter. Sometimes I remember them differently and terror sends me back to the paper; there they remain. There, do you understand? I did not add them in the night. I do not know how to prove I did not.

You have not even accused me. Forgive me. You are silent, and I prepare my defense; you ask about my day, and I appear with my evidence. It must be tiring. Sometimes I imagine how tiring you find this habit of bringing you anything and waiting, of never quite withdrawing, of lingering by the door after saying goodbye.

But there was someone. There must have been someone.

Because if I invented them, tell me how far the invention goes. That letter too? The afternoon I opened it, the light on the table, my haste to bring it to you? I remember thinking: now. How ashamed I am to remember my certainty. Now you will notice. Now I shall not have to explain myself. And while you read, I watched you read; followed your eyes, trying to guess which word would make you stop.

You reached the end.

You handed the paper back.

I have kept even the crease your fingers left in it.

I should not have brought it to you. That is what I told myself afterward: I should not have laid my hunger before you so nakedly. Perhaps there was a demand in my face that spoiled whatever I offered. Perhaps I should have left the letter among other things, let you come upon it, let your pride arise without feeling summoned. From then on I learned to leave my work lying about as though by accident. I left it open. I went away. I came back for something I did not need.

Nothing had moved.

Tell me if I am losing my mind. If this need for you to value me has learned to speak in other voices, to write to me from far away, to people with witnesses a room in which you never linger. Tell me if I have lent them a mouth, a face, a memory. I can bear for you to tell me.

No. I do not know if I can.

But tell me.

The paper grew damp between my hands. I tried not to touch the ink; I still needed to read it, still needed someone to have written those words. Tears made the letters uncertain, and I leaned closer, and the closer I leaned the less I could make out. I set the sheet upon the table. I smoothed its edges with absurd care. It must not be spoiled. It was evidence. It was what remained of that afternoon when, for a few minutes, I had believed I was about to reach you.

Sometimes I have wished no one had noticed anything. I am ashamed to say it. I have received generous words and, before thanking the person who offered them, I have felt the cruelty of their not being yours. Someone praised what I had made; I smiled and searched for a way to tell you. Already I was abandoning the voice that had given me its attention. Already I was returning to you.

Afterward I hated myself for it.

They owed me nothing. They had stopped. They had read, they had looked, they had found something worthy of remaining. Why could I not rest there? Why did I return to your silence as though it guarded a verdict unknown to everyone else?

Perhaps because you knew me before. Before I knew how to make any of the things I now bring before you. And I fear you remember something the others cannot discern: some old insufficiency, some poverty that work only barely conceals. When they praise me, I think they do not know yet. When you are silent, I think you do.

Tell me what you have observed.

Do not leave me to scrutinize myself alone.

Then I would return to the mirror. I brought my face close. Beneath the iris, I searched for the imposture. I watched myself until I became strange to myself; until those eyes seemed to belong to someone I distrusted as well.

But the stars persisted. After the weeping, against the exhausted eyelid, they persisted still.

Perhaps one more light. Perhaps a little more height. A work you could not leave upon the table, a name that reached your ear before I did; some terrible perfection, some beauty without a fissure through which your gaze might slip and abandon me.

I learned to keep vigil. I learned to polish whatever I made until exhaustion. I struck out a word, restored it; corrected a form that by morning seemed unworthy again. I knew the sounds of the house when everyone slept. I knew the first light and the resentment with which one receives it when the work is still unfinished.

I came to you with the radiance prepared and the trembling concealed.

I did not want to seem anxious. I tried to speak of something else. I had rehearsed the moment of showing you my work with such minuteness that, when at last it came, I could scarcely hold it in my hands. You praised some distant thing. I nodded. I even asked about it, even helped you prolong that enthusiasm from which I was absent.

Then I went back and began again.

Once more, I told myself. Once more, and you will notice them.

And before the day was over, I had already forgiven you for something I had never dared reproach you for.

Thus hope grew old without losing its obedience. Each morning it dressed itself again, stood upright again, offered you what the night before it had sworn never to offer you again. It was enough for you to turn your head. That infinitesimal promise of attention was enough for all that had fallen to rise, for me to mistake, once more, your nearness for my arrival.

Sometimes I imagined my death. I would catch myself arranging your grief with a minuteness that afterward shamed me: where you would stop, which page you would find, how long it would take my name to break upon your lips. I undid the scene. I made it again. Something was always missing. I always tried to prolong within it the instant of your pride, as though I might remain to receive it.

But when death came, it did not abide by my rehearsals.

There was one breath and then none. My hands lay still; all that they had yet to do remained scattered across the table. I did not have time to put the papers in order. I did not have time to turn my face toward the door.

I died without knowing whether you had noticed the stars.

With me, they faltered. One by one they gave way in my eyes; their trembling went out beneath the lids, and the face I had raised so many times toward yours was left without supplication. Someone bent down to close my eyes. No one saw the lights depart.

That night they appeared in the sky.

You came afterward.

There were flowers. There was a stillness others busied themselves calling rest. You spoke my name, and nothing turned toward you. You said it again, more softly, as though you might still keep from waking me. On the table you recognized my papers. You touched one; beneath it lay another, and another, and another. How much I had left there. How much I had placed within reach of your hands.

Then you went outside.

The night was clear. So clear that you stopped upon the threshold.

And you raised your eyes.

There.

At first it was scarcely more than a hesitation: the familiarity of a gleam whose origin you could not remember. Then you lifted a hand to your face, as though something at that height compelled you to shield your eyes.

You had recognized them.

They were the same. The ones that lit my vigils, the ones others had noticed in everything I made, the ones I had lifted toward you so many times. Not one had acquired in the sky a beauty it had lacked in my gaze. Not one. And yet how long you stood looking at them.

There was someone beside you. From that height I could not make out the face; only a shadow waiting with you, following the direction of your hand when you began to point.

You spoke of me.

At first I did not hear my name. I recognized your voice lingering over my things: that page, another; the nights when a strip of light remained beneath my door; the way I let the house grow cold without noticing that winter had come.

You remembered a sentence. You repeated it. You searched for another, and when you could not find it you closed your eyes with a small, meticulous grief, as though losing those words were losing me again.

I did not know you remembered them.

The shadow beside you turned toward you. You went on. There was so much to tell, now. So many things you had observed without telling me, so many you were only beginning to understand as you said them aloud. You raised your hand toward one star and then another, like someone showing the rooms of a house in which one was once happy and can no longer enter.

And I listened to you.

There was still in me that which listened.

The body had ceased; its weariness had ceased, its vigils, the shame of bringing you a work and waiting. But that waiting had survived. Loosed from my hands, with no mouth left to deny it, it still inclined itself toward you. Not even the earth upon my eyelids had managed to close it.

Then I heard you say that that light had lived beneath your roof.

You said it with pride.

You stopped.

You looked toward the dark window, and when you lifted your eyes back to the sky your face wore the expression of someone who has just understood a question many years after hearing it. Your hand remained raised for a moment; then it descended, slowly, without having reached anything.

The first tear fell while you were still trying to speak.

I saw it form. I saw it hold one of my stars in its trembling. It descended your cheek, lingered beside your mouth; you tried to continue the story and your lips trembled beneath its salt.

I did not turn from it what remained of my sight.

There went your pride. There it went, at last, pierced through by all that you could no longer tell me in time. And I, who had arranged that tear so many times, who had summoned it in secret from the depths of my days, discovered how much it hurt to watch it without being able to draw near and wipe it away.

The shadow beside you was silent.

You pointed again. There were stories left. There was an entire life left to tell beneath those lights, and you began at the beginning, with a pair of small hands, with the first time that...

I could not go on listening.

With the tear, my waiting descended as well. I felt its old obstinacy give way, the knot I had carried intact beyond death come undone. That which in me still rose when you spoke my name ceased to rise. That which pleaded once more, once more, at last opened its empty hands.

Your tear reached the earth.

And in it died the last of me that was still waiting for you.

You went on speaking. Before that faceless presence, beneath the stars that had been my eyes, you went on telling who I had been.