

THE TOBACCO SHOP*

I'm nothing.
I'll always be nothing.
I can't want to be something.
But I have in me all the dreams of the world.

Windows of my room,
The room of one of the world's millions nobody knows
(And if they knew me, what would they know?),
You open onto the mystery of a street continually crossed by people,
A street inaccessible to any and every thought,
Real, impossibly real, certain, unknowingly certain,
With the mystery of things beneath the stones and beings,
With death making the walls damp and the hair of men white,
With Destiny driving the wagon of everything down the road of nothing.

Today I'm defeated, as if I'd learned the truth.
Today I'm lucid, as if I were about to die
And had no greater kinship with things
Than to say farewell, this building and this side of the street becoming
A row of train cars, with the whistle for departure
Blowing in my head
And my nerves jolting and bones creaking as we pull out.

Today I'm bewildered, like a man who wondered and discovered and forgot.
Today I'm torn between the loyalty I owe
To the outward reality of the Tobacco Shop across the street
And to the inward reality of my feeling that everything's a dream.

I failed in everything.
Since I had no ambition, perhaps I failed in nothing.
I left the education I was given,

*From *Fernando Pessoa & Co.: selected poems*, by Fernando Pessoa, edited and translated from the Portuguese by Richard Zenith. (Grove Press, 1998). Reprinted with the permission of Grove Press.

Climbing down from the window at the back of the house.
I went to the country with big plans.
But all I found was grass and trees,
And when there were people they were just like others.
I step back from the window and sit in a chair. What should I think about?

How should I know what I'll be, I who don't know what I am?
Be what I think? But I think of being so many things!
And there are so many who think of being the same thing that we can't
all be it!

Genius? At this moment
A hundred thousand brains are dreaming they're geniuses like me,
And it may be that history won't remember even one,
All of their imagined conquests amounting to so much dung.
No, I don't believe in me.
Insane asylums are full of lunatics with certainties!
Am I, who have no certainties, more right or less right?
No, not even in me . . .

In how many garrets and non-garrets of the world
Are self-convinced geniuses at this moment dreaming?
How many lofty and noble and lucid aspirations
—Yes, truly lofty and noble and lucid
And perhaps even attainable—
Will never see the true light of day or find a sympathetic ear?
The world is for those born to conquer it,
Not for those who dream they can conquer it, even if they're right.
I've done more in dreams than Napoleon.

I've held move humanities against my hypothetical breast than Christ.
I've secretly invented philosophies such as Kant never wrote.
But I am, and perhaps will always be, the man in the garret,
Even though I don't live in one.
I'll always be *the one who wasn't born for that*;
I'll always be merely *the one who had qualities*;
I'll always be the one who waited for a door to open in a wall without doors

And sang the song of the Infinite in a chicken coop
And heard the voice of God in a covered well.
Believe in me? No, not in anything.
Let Nature pour over my seething head
Its sun, its rain, and the wind that finds my hair,
And let the rest come if it will or must, or let it not come.
Cardiac slaves of the stars,
We conquered the whole world before getting out of bed,
But we woke up and it's hazy,
We got up and it's alien,
We went outside and it's the entire earth
Plus the solar system and the Milky Way and the Indefinite.

(Eat your chocolates, little girl,
Eat your chocolates!
Believe me, there's no metaphysics on earth like chocolates,
And all religions put together teach no more than the candy shop.
Eat, dirty little girl, eat!
If only I could eat chocolates with the same truth as you!
But I think and, removing the silver paper that's tinfoil,
I throw it all on the ground, as I've thrown out life.)

But at least, from my bitterness over what I'll never be,
There remains the hasty writing of these verses,
A broken gateway to the Impossible.
But at least I confer on myself a contempt without tears,
Noble at least in the sweeping gesture by which I fling
The dirty laundry that's me—with no list—into the stream of things,
And I stay at home, shirtless.

(O my consoler, who doesn't exist and therefore consoles,
Be you a Greek goddess, conceived as a living statue,
Or a patrician woman of Rome, impossibly noble and dire,
Or a princess of the troubadours, all charm and grace,
Or an eighteenth-century marchioness, décolleté and aloof,
Or a famous courtesan from our parents' generation,

Or something modern, I can't quite imagine what—
Whatever all of this is, whatever you are, if you can inspire, then inspire me!
My heart is a poured-out bucket.
In the same way invokers of spirits invoke spirits, I invoke
My own self and find nothing.
I go to the window and see the street with absolute clarity.
I see the shops, I see the sidewalks, I see the passing cars,
I see the clothed living beings who pass each other.
I see the dogs that also exist,
And all of this weighs on me like a sentence of exile,
And all of this is foreign, like everything else.)

I've lived, studied, loved, and even believed,
And today there's not a beggar I don't envy just because he isn't me.
I look at the tatters and sores and falsehood of each one,
And I think: perhaps you never lived or studied or loved or believed
(For it's possible to do all of this without having done any of it);
Perhaps you've merely existed, as when a lizard has its tail cut off
And the tail keeps on twitching, without the lizard.

I made of myself what I was no good at making,
And what I could have made of myself I didn't.
I put on the wrong costume
And was immediately taken for someone I wasn't, and I said nothing and was
lost.
When I went to take off the mask,
It was stuck to my face.
When I got it off and saw myself in the mirror,
I had already grown old.
I was drunk and no longer knew how to wear the costume that I hadn't taken
off.
I threw out the mask and slept in the closet
Like a dog tolerated by the management
Because it's harmless,
And I'll write down this story to prove I'm sublime.

Musical essence of my useless verses,
If only I could look at you as something I had made
Instead of always looking at the Tobacco Shop across the street,
Trampling on my consciousness of existing,
Like a rug a drunkard stumbles on
Or a doormat stolen by gypsies and it's not worth a thing.

But the Tobacco Shop Owner has come to the door and is standing there.
I look at him with the discomfort of a half-twisted neck
Compounded by the discomfort of a half-grasping soul.
He will die and I will die.
He'll leave his signboard, I'll leave my poems.
His sign will also eventually die, and so will my poems.
Eventually the street where the sign was will die,
And so will the language in which my poems were written.
Then the whirling planet where all of this happened will die.

On other planets of other solar systems something like people
Will continue to make things like poems and to live under things like signs,
Always one thing facing the other,
Always one thing as useless as the other,
Always the impossible as stupid as reality,
Always the inner mystery as true as the mystery sleeping on the surface.
Always this thing or always that, or neither one thing nor the other.

But a man has entered the Tobacco Shop (to buy tobacco?),
And plausible reality suddenly hits me.
I half rise from my chair—energetic, convinced, human—
And will try to write these verses in which I say the opposite.

I light up a cigarette as I think about writing them,
And in that cigarette I savor a freedom from all thought.
My eyes follow the smoke as if it were my own trail

And I enjoy, for a sensitive and fitting moment,
A liberation from all speculation
And an awareness that metaphysics is a consequence of not feeling very well.
Then I lean back in the chair
And keep smoking.
As long as Destiny permits, I'll keep smoking.

(If I married my washwoman's daughter
Perhaps I would be happy.)
I get up from the chair. I go to the window.
The man has come out of the Tobacco shop (putting change into his pocket?)
Ah, I know him: it's unmetaphysical Esteves.
(The Tobacco Shop Owner has come to the door.)
As if by divine instinct, Esteves turns around and sees me.
He waves hello, I shout back "Hello, Esteves!" and the universe
Falls back into place without ideals or hopes, and the Owner of the Tobacco
Shop smiles.