

Ahmed Ait Daraou

VANISHING

PRELUDE

The Chinese, probably the wisest race the Creator of the universe chose to endow part of this earth with, claim that a man can only start living when he is no longer afraid of death. Which means in stoic logic that since the overwhelming majority of people *are* afraid of death, they have never begun living; or they lead sham lives; or they are the living dead. The formula would look something like this:

$$\sim (\neg Fd \supset Lb) \ \& \ \sim (\forall x \equiv Fd) \Rightarrow \forall x \equiv (\neg L \vee Ls \vee Ld)$$

It is true that most artists avoid dealing with death as a subject matter; they avoid showing death in its detailed and precise actions, because death is not pretty. In literature, for instance, the most pathetic characters I have ever met are afraid of death and haunted by their fear. I am thinking of that retired colonel in Ernest Hemingway's *Across the River and into the Trees*. There are myriads (male and female, young and old, in fiction and reality) like that colonel. But take Antigone or Hamlet. There is nothing pathetic about those two. When Hamlet seems wishy-washy and undecided and hesitant, he is never afraid of death; he is only wondering whether he should inflict it on himself or on his enemies. Ah, here's *das Stichwort*: to inflict. Death is always inflicted: by self; by others; by programmed quirks in the biological process; by hazard; by the ultimate deliquescence of what started out as a Big Bang.

SLAUGHTERHOUSES

If you have never been inside a slaughterhouse, you are missing a lot. You don't have to be there physically. You can do it virtually by watching a movie on the subject in the coziness of your living room. I have done both. I have been inside a slaughterhouse since I was a child. My father, who was an outstanding butcher, a veritable master of his craft, took me there on many occasions. The impact and full meaning of what goes on inside a slaughterhouse came to me as a fantastic illumination many years later, when I was a

grown man, on the threshold of middle age. I was living in Paris, the most cruel and shallow city I know, unless you have money to burn. It was a lonely Sunday afternoon in late May. The sky was cloudless and without secrets like a naked woman; the streets were empty; the famous sunlight of Paris was soft and glazed with maddening insolence. I walked to the Chaillot Cinemathèque and saw this movie about slaughterhouses. The movie theater was pretty deserted; we were three or four lost souls sitting many rows apart like scattered shells on a beach in winter. The movie was in black-and-white. I forget its exact title. It was something like *Beef* or *Meat*. I also forget its director's name. It sounded Jewish, something like Goldberg or Rosenthal, though such names could be misleading since I have met gentiles thus named. At any rate, the movie was more a straightforward documentary than a piece of doctored fiction. No background music and hardly any comments. Just this heavy and oppressive silence as the camera wreaked havoc inside that slaughterhouse. I rate this film among the three best films I have ever seen (and I have seen plenty), the other two being Fellini's *And the Ship Sails On* and Idliko Enyedi's *My 20th Century*.

That being as it may, *Beef* hit me hard, possibly because of the loneliness and cruelty of Paris, but also because the film contains some absolute truths about life and death. Question: are animals aware of their mortality like humans? If yes, how do they cope with the inevitability of death? Now that Chicago slaughterhouse looked quite innocuous: modern buildings; very clean; nice functional parking; all the elements and contraptions of huge industry. The trucks, neat and chrome-clad and immaculate in their whiteness and geometry, would arrive roaring with their loads, day and night, and discharge cows and heifers and bulls and steers that would clatter in docile procession onto tunnels and bridges and viaducts to the entrails and maws and hidden organs of the slaughterhouse. The pigs also looked docile though somewhat dwarfed as they cantered along with their snouts to the ground, their big, obscene nostrils throbbing in the foolish expectation of an orgy of food and a mud bath perhaps? Then the rams and ewes and sheep and lambs followed suit. Except that this tribe was highly reluctant, as though they were suspicious of those shining Plexiglas tunnels and narrow bridges and steel-ramped alleys that all led, eventually, to a vast and complicated blood bath. In the midst of this world of steel and glass and roaring trucks and powerful stadium lights and all the men shouting and busy and somewhat nervous, and that

slaughterhouse spreading there like a panting and insatiate monster, in the midst of it all, the ovine species were reluctant and careful as I said. They did not trust what they did not know. And they have only known the fat and familiar peace of green fields with fresh running water and the gruff playfulness of sheep-dogs, and the firm kindness of the men who shore their fleece. Now this Chicago building and the fumes from the exhaust pipes of the trucks and their instinctive awareness of the proximity of blood and offal must not have been reassuring to the ovine group, because they stubbornly refused to go along and follow, sheep-like, into the tunnels and halls and viaducts and bridges that would lead them to their death. But the slaughterhouse officials meant business. They were no foolish amateurs. Presently, knowing the nature of sheep so well, the manager produced this beautiful ram. You should have seen him. Healthy and big, well-fed, with his fleece of a glossy white, his horns curling in a double spiral on each side of his head like futuristic wings; his hoofs had been manicured and lacquered a shining black; his tail had been neatly clipped of its wool, looking nude and sophisticated. Had the film been in color, someone would have smeared some lipstick on that ram and done his eyelashes and powdered his face I think. Was he dandy! Like a huge millionaire French poodle out of the hands of some expensive beautician. The minute that ram took the stage and spot- and floodlights singled him out at a distance, weird like a Hollywood star, all the ovine tribe shut up at once and stared at this unexpected idol. I forgot to tell you that though *Beef* had no background music there were plenty of beautiful soundtracks of noises made by scared animals: what of the bellowing steers and bulls, the bawling heifers and cows, the squealing and screeching porcine family, the bleating and trembling and beseeching voices of the lambs and sheep. And now that pretty, wealthy, healthy star-like ram. I think in the slaughterhouse jargon of some countries he is called the traitor. Maybe he is simply called the leader in Chicago. But the minute he stood in front of that ovine tribe, his eyes hooded and heavy with cynical scorn, he knew he had their attention for they grew silent at once as if expecting miraculous salvation from this guru cousin. He turned around, knowing his way about that maze of tunnels and halls and corridors and galleries and covered bridges, and he began to swagger at first, keeping his distance; then the whole flock began to move, having found a leader at last, having perceived some sense of logic out of this novel disarray and confusion; the pretty star with lacquered hoofs and dandy tail on the move, lively and

serious with the flock eagerly trotting behind, went through the wide mouth of the tunnel, guiding the meek flock into the illusion of security and peace and surely vast fat fields of greenery, until the funnel led into its inevitable narrow path, the pretty and wealthy ram galloping way ahead, with the flock struggling in pursuit, until their guru spotted the unobtrusive, almost secret side-door and slipped through it while an employee slid it shut behind him. The flock continued on its rattling race, following now a leaderless, traitorless corridor with a dark blur at its end, the maw of the slaughterhouse. By then the pretty ram must have gone to his million-dollar reward consisting of numerous cool and beautiful ewes; luxury aplenty; maybe he was addicted to some expensive drug; the camera didn't tell. Once he vanished through the secret door, the camera ignored him, following, ruthless and cunning, after the rushing flock from different angles until death started doing its job, not giving time to any member of that flock to realize what hit him, which was a form of mercy. *Beef* didn't show any mules or donkeys or horses or camels. I guess Chicago doesn't do those. But other slaughterhouses in other countries do. I have seen it live, not in a movie.

HOSPITALS

While going to school at the Sorbonne I worked nightshifts at two hospitals, the International University Hospital and the Hôtel-Dieu, just behind Notre-Dame Cathedral in the very center of Paris. I worked for twelve hours three nights at each hospital—7 P.M. to 7 A.M.—and attended classes during the day.

At the International Hospital the job was easier and more comfortable, yet spiritually painful and depressing. I was in charge of a ward in the psychiatry section. My job was absolutely menial of course. The patients were suffering from mild or soft madness. No trace of violence, ever. A lot of shrieking at times and amazing bouts of raving that were torture indeed to anyone sane who made the mistake of listening and trying to make sense. The patients were mixed, mainly adults of both sexes, but there was an adolescent boy who had a form of diabetes which drove him into constant delirium. The patients had single rooms. This hospital was richly endowed, being international and university and all.

My job was easy. When I arrived at seven I donned my white overall and headed for the kitchen where the trays would be about ready. Then I would

push the cart, distributing the food, saying hello there, how're we doing tonight, cracking a joke with those who were not too far gone and who might respond or grin; after dinner I would pick up the trays. There was a lot of leftover food, those patients not being right hungry; otherwise they wouldn't be there, would they? I would push my cart back to the kitchen, the hall of the ward full of female nurses (this was gentle madness, therefore no need for male nurses and muscle), with a doctor or two busily fleeing by. I would wink at a nurse I had already made or was about to make. Most nurses I knew in both hospitals were nymphomaniacs of sorts. It makes sense too when you live with all that suffering and pain and the tangible and close spectre of death; sooner or later you say to hell with it, let's *carpe diem* and live while we can, even if living means senseless fucking and uppers and downers.

There was this patient. Louise was her name. Stunningly pretty and serene most of the time. She spent hours making up her face in front of the mirror, taking care of her long, beautifully groomed nails, trying on different and expensive clothes, using wigs sometimes. She had a predilection for short skirts, way above the knees, and they did justice to her slender legs. She was twenty-five, twenty-six? Then she would go out in the afternoon, weather permitting, and sit at a table in the same sidewalk cafe at a stone's throw from the hospital and chain-smoke, displaying her fascinating, silk-stockinged legs, not speaking to anyone, just ogling young men as they passed by; but the waiters knew her and of course quickly spread the word that she was one of the crazies from the next door loon house and nobody paid much attention to her or wanted to take advantage. The doctors, knowing her mild state, allowed her those harmless afternoons outside. Once in a while, on my day off, I would stroll by and see Louise at her table on the sidewalk cafe with the sunlight playing on her gorgeous legs and she would greet me with this sincere and passionate warmth gushing out of her damp brown eyes as if she hadn't seen me in years, her ashtray overflowing with filterless Gauloises butts smeared with sienna lipstick, her long crimson nails fidgeting and playing a tattoo on the side of the half-empty glass of grenadine-and-milk. I would sit with Louise for a couple of minutes, humoring her and, not being a saint, stealing looks at those appetizing legs; then I would hit the bar inside the cafe and down a couple of beers, chatting and shooting the usual bull with the barman and waiters and acquaintances about football and horses and dog races and a little lotto maybe, or I would swap gossip on our respective

hanky-panky life. One day, this pure unadulterated black fellow, a regular at that bar and a recent immigrant from Cuba, told us how he was cunnilinguing some Parisian lady when this highly salty flavor started scorching his taste buds, but he went on doing his duty, lapping up the blood, not letting that bit of menstruation bother him, throwing the lady a wild orgasm into the bargain; that was in the dumb and innocent and paranoia-free days before AIDS changed the rules of the sex-game.

The diabetic boy's name was Abdu. He was Algerian. His parents were wealthy Uncle Toms; I could see that plainly; they have probably been Uncle-Tomming the French for generations; but that's history although I have a hunch that history has played a nasty trick on all the nations which happened to have been contaminated by French colonialism. Indeed, look at French black Africa: bled to the bone; and Algeria, where the French slaughtered millions; and Indochina (later Vietnam, a poisoned gift that the badly-whipped Frogs promptly slipped over to gullible and careless Big Brother); and Cambodia and Laos and Haiti. The French are right smart and lovely if you are romantic about food and wine and cheese and perfume and fancy clothes, but they are definitely bad news if they get inside the political and economic system of any nation; much worse than some incurable disease which can only kill you and you forget about it; but the French are there to stay, forcing their habits and language and France on generations to come, sucking the life-blood out of them, with no way out; but that's another story.

Abdu looked like a village idiot, always slobbering and drooling a little at one corner of his mouth. Sometimes he would sing, in a flat monotone, words that didn't exist in any language, that he made up, I think, coining them along as he shouted fiercely, finding his rhythm, clapping and nodding. I fought the temptation to try and understand Abdu's songs and drivel, but he frequently intruded into my sleep and got my attention then, providing me with plenty of nightmares, especially a recurrent, freaky one where Abdu would be praying on his knees to the Lord Jesus, saying *seigneur, seigneur*, reciting *ave marias* and his catechism and I would try and correct him as if he were making some fatal mistake, shouting at him, eh Abdu, you're praying to the wrong deity; aren't you supposed to make your forehead and nose touch the ground and ask Allah for help? But no way! His catechism would flow, incomprehensible and fast, like a rural auctioneer's peroration. However, that was only in nightmares. In real life he would sing most of the time, calling for his mom a lot;

or he would think that he was still at school and sit on one of the benches in the long, mostly deserted corridor and raise his finger to the opposite blank wall and shout eh teacher, teacher, I know the answer, the index finger of his right hand twitching in the air to attract that invisible master's attention; then Abdu would beam at the cold neon-washed wall, a little crust of foam hanging from one corner of his mouth while the other corner kept dripping its usual drool; then his right hand would fall into his lap and he would give the answer to that school teacher he alone could see: one plus the square tangent of x equals one divided by the square cosine of x . Abdu would giggle then, happy as could be, probably because his teacher was congratulating him.

One evening, when I went to work at the International Hospital, I learned that Louise had committed suicide. It was pretty spectacular from what I was told. She was sitting, her usual serene self at the sidewalk cafe, when she rose slowly, extending her arms above her head, her hands cupped above her hair as both wrists fell, languid and graceful like sleepy flowers; then she discarded her high-heeled shoes and danced as if she had the lead role in the *Nutcracker* or *Swan Lake*, her beautifully groomed toes in the silk stockings barely skimming over the smooth asphalt of Jourdan Boulevard as she performed several *chassés-croisés* and *pas-de-deux*, unfolding her arms with the beauty of slow fireworks, running and singing in one breath as she faced the 116 rumbling down on its reserved track, smashing her as she finished singing: "Come, beloved darling! We've waited too long!" As the bus driver rammed the breaks, the huge bus did slow down, rocking a little on its hind flanks, making the impact more deadly and definite while the fragile Louise was killed on the spot, as though her own momentum and the velocity of the bus had had an old agreement which they finally decided to ratify on that beautiful Sunday. One of the waiters, who had seen Louise's last exit out of this life, gave me the details over beer at a little bar in Passy. Later, one of the nurses, seeing how shocked I was by Louise's suicide, showed me her file. In a viciously indecipherable hand, a trait of all French *em deez*, I could read these words: "Louise Vauchelle, 24 years. Evolutive neurosis with occasional delusion and hallucination. Due to thwarted or unsuccessful intense wish to become a ballet dancer. Failing that, bitter frustration when realizing she would never be a diva. Several failures in love affairs with a fixation on one Benoît Forestier. Father: busy wealthy banker. Mother: very egocentric." The word egocentric was underlined twice in red in a gesture of rage.

The anxiety of solitude. That was what hit me most during those nights while I sat at my little desk in the hall, not far from the small office where the nurses on duty sat chatting or knitting. Last night Abdu plunged into a coma. Maybe that newly-rich overdoting mother of his smuggled some fat chocolate cake to him, possibly throwing in a syrupy pie well loaded with a wealth of cream. I was the one who rushed Abdu to the intensive-care unit with an intern and a couple of nurses trotting by. Abdu looked like he was a goner for sure: his face drained of blood, his eyeballs rolled backward in their sockets; maybe he was already on a far-away orbit, putting to practice that algorithm of his, except that the tangent he was on was heading for infinity. I soon forgot about Abdu. He never came back to the psychiatry ward. And you can't grow sentimental about patients; otherwise you lose your marbles for sure. Besides, at the emergency section of the Hôtel-Dieu hospital, a couple of fresh deaths made me forget Abdu and Louise pretty quick. First there was this fat fellow who was brought in after a car accident. That was a case of implosion. The body was contained in a black plastic bag. I wheeled it first to surgery where the interns got a little practice by shoving the guts back inside and putting the rib-cage into place; after they sewed up the gashes, I pushed the stretcher to the morgue with the help of a fellow employee. We always went in pairs to the morgue. There were usually plenty of bodies waiting to be tagged and put inside the cooler. They were all naked, men and women, young and old; the crazy night watchman, a toothless drunk, used to speak to the dead, greeting them with a *bonsoir, messieur-dames!* "Oh the pretty lady," he would say, giggling, touching the nakedness of young women.

A young Frenchwoman jumped from the top of the Notre-Dame Cathedral and landed on an American tourist who was passing by; they were put side by side in the morgue. The American tourist, a beautiful woman in her early twenties, looked so peaceful with her long blonde hair covering her shoulders and breasts and coming down to her hips. She did not show a single bruise. What a way to go! She must have saved her money and dreamed about Paris for years! And when she finally made it, it was to meet with her death, the messenger of which was this young Frenchwoman who must have had it with Paris and possibly love and desire and certainly life . . . though we are told that suicides definitely change their mind after they jump as if some ultimate truth is harshly spelled out to them in those final seconds while in the ruthless grip of gravity; but then it's always too late, too late always.

FIRST INTERLUDE
OR
EVIDENCE OF LOVE

This was in the late sixties. In Amsterdam. Hitchhiking though Holland, not having enough of the windmills and the tulips. I understood, quite vaguely, why such a country, flat and conquered on the sea, polder after polder, could produce tremendous painters. I was inebriated by youth and unconscious of its value, stupidly taking life for granted, healthy and happy-go-lucky. I had met this Dutch girl, Johannecke, at an international summer youth camp in Royan, France. She was a beauty. I was scared of her beauty. But such is youth, clumsy and dumb. So after the summer we became pen-pals and I wrote her these gushing letters, painstakingly singing my love and she responded by inviting me to visit. When I arrived in Amsterdam she gave me the usual tour, the museum and the canals and the Venice of the North. I loved Holland because of the gray sky and the occasional rain and drizzle after the constant and imbecile sun of the South. One evening, still inebriated on Johannecke, still trembling at her slightest touch, I went to a party at her home. It was a birthday party, I think. Memory is a sieve. There was a lot of cigarette smoke and jazz and beer, and the incredible warmth of the North. I was the only foreigner there, but with Johannecke by my side I felt like a million bucks. Except that she was not truly by my side. This is how it was:

The party was in full swing. There was this feeble, handicapped (disabled is a nicer word, I know) young man stretched on a sofa. He was sick. Maybe eighteen, nineteen years old? Everybody went on drinking and laughing as if the young man were absolutely normal, one of us in fact; no pity you see. You don't hit people with your pity in the West. The young man had undergone complicated surgery and had to be fed through tubes and funnels and contraptions. But he looked all right: quite red in the face though emaciated a bit; his blond hair neatly combed. He was smiling and silent and lying there on the sofa as if ready to join in the fun. And Johannecke kneeling by his side, patiently pouring sweet Dutch beer into a tube that went to his stomach. Maybe his esophagus had been removed, I don't know. But how careful and patient and loving Johannecke was! How beautiful too, with her golden hair, her big misty blue eyes, her flushed cheeks and dazzling smile. I failed to understand then. There was health and strength and admiration galore around

Johannecke. But she chose to spend the evening feeding beer to that young man, certainly not for pity's sake, but for love, for love! That's how I see it now, some thirty years hence.

CONCENTRATION CAMPS

Tacitus and Suetonius have unwittingly described concentration camps, for what were Nero's and Domitian's arenas? Innocent people, children and men and women old and young flocking from the dungeons to neatly groomed sand, expecting the carefully starved beasts to do their work: bears, lions, gladiators, tigers, fire once in a while. The works. The rest of mankind had their concentration camps before Nero and at the same time and after and elsewhere. Perhaps there was no Tacitus or Suetonius at hand.

Anne Frank's *Diary* is worth many a book I have read. Pay attention to her sanctity. Here is a kid who started her calvary in an attic in Holland, with family and the boy next door and love and fear and this incredible detachment, this total absence of hate or bitterness or self-pity. There is hope for mankind after all! For a single sentence by Anne Frank is worth many a song by Nero or a speech by Hitler!

Now, wherefore the aberration? Why do people meekly flock to their death? Naked, shivering, respecting the queue, standing in line. So that the Neros and their vestals can get a kick? So that Von Throtta can experiment with his machine-guns?

I can only imagine the concentration camps covered with snow in Poland and Germany and Russia and the sunny camps in South Africa and Algeria where the British and the Germans and the French and the Russians tortured and killed openly, with their victims clocking in, quite docile, heading for the slaughterhouse, with somebody there to enjoy the show.

The kapos working hard for their soft keep. The demeaning need for survival. The daily pettiness. The pursuit of grub at any cost. The horror. Hair shorn. Gold plucked from sorry decayed teeth. The French forcing a couple of political prisoners to be sodomized in the sunny arena of the Aures while all the other prisoners are watching. Tigellinius having Lygia tied naked to an auroch's horns so that he could test Ursus's strength for the refined taste of Nero. And what did the SS thugs enjoy on those snowy or sunny days, well fed on nice *Schweineerei*, power-satt while their victims flocked down the hall,

following some kapo-traitor to their end? Sure, they were doing their job. Like any headman or torturer practicing his craft. True, to each his *Schicksal* or doom. Coop-like trains rolling toward certain death. What *did* go on inside all those minds despite the heat and anxiety and promiscuity?

SECOND INTERLUDE
OR
AFFECTION

Loneliness is the source of a strange pain, a constant burden that is variably borne by its victims. I can bear loneliness tolerably well, better than most. I don't know how I would behave in strict solitary confinement, but staying for days, sometimes for weeks, quite alone in my house, has not bothered me much. To break the monotony of this loneliness I bought a rooster and three hens and let them loose in the backyard. The basic chore toward my daily meditation consists in sweeping the poultry droppings. My 考案 (*kôan*) for the first day I adopted my range rooster and his hens was: the way to true vegetarianism. I named my favorite hen, a white Wyandotte, Yoko; the dark Brahma hen I named Kôcha; the rooster and the remaining hen, both Rhode Island Reds, I called them Dannasama and Akai, respectively.

As the birds grew familiar with me and as the hens began laying, I slowly progressed in my daily meditation on vegetarianism; after feeding the birds and sweeping their droppings, I would sit down and watch them go about the daily business of living, looking for delicacies of food such as beetles or stray gnats, scratching the dirt after ubiquitous insects, the rooster suddenly doing a fast tattoo with both of his feet like tap-dancing, thus sending a message to Yoko or Kôcha or Akai, and the hen of momentary desire would stop in her track, offering herself, the tips of her wings lifting like ailerons and Dannasama would mount her promptly, fastening his big yellow beak to the nape of her neck and their intercourse would be over in seconds, Dannasama's sperm fertilizing the egg in gestation, prompting life to bloom eventually. There was affection there; I would say love too, because Dannasama would dance around his beloved, stretching his powerful red and black wing like a *moletta* or a lady's fan, singing a two-note guttural and simple song, celebrating his feelings for that hen of the moment.

My solitude is growing fat, feeding on itself, feeding on nothing, no one, breeding lonesomeness. That's all right; that's what I must triumph over. Of course the chickens help by being there, carrying on with their lives, Dannasama crowing a lot; he sure is happy. Who wouldn't be, with three pretty females at his beck-and-call? And an innocuous human being overfeeding him and his coop-hold, sweeping away the droppings to manure the vegetable garden, with no other cock to give him trouble or competition whatsoever! Life is treating Dannasama rather well, I think. He is thriving, his feathers shining and shimmering in the sun with red and honey and brown colors changing reflections and hues, his tail distinguished with such rich and arched panache in its glaucous coat. He looks quite respectable.

On January 22nd Yoko went into brooding. I sat her on 14 eggs, some her own, but a few from Kôcha and Akai. There were also three eggs of unknown parents that I got from a farm nearby. The brood was successfully hatched on the 11th and the 12th of February. Thirteen chicks pierced their way out and embraced life, chirping and twittering, leaving the shells neatly mopped and dry. Yoko looks happy and very serious about her new motherly duties. I have no way of distinguishing the males from the females although I know that in Japan there are experts who can distinguish the sexes with a light touch of the finger as soon as the chicks are hatched. There are machines that can perform this task too, and quite accurately. I'm in no hurry though. I can wait and see as the chicks grow. After a few weeks, the friendliest and most lovely chick turned out to be of foreign and unknown lineage from the neighboring farm. This chick has very rich dark-gray feathers (the color painters call Payne's gray).

I have spoiled Yoko because of her brood. But today she made me angry by messing up the feed bags in the small toolroom in the garden. I chased her with the broom, cursing her vehemently. My anger made me ashamed and I sat down and I looked at the chicks and at their mother and at their aunts and father and thought I'm raising you for a different purpose altogether, because your necks will never taste the sharpness of the blade. You are helping me become a vegetarian since our mutual affection is now sealed; this affection, through vegetarianism, will bring me closer to the animal and vegetable kingdoms. Of course Hitler claimed to be (and was) a vegetarian. And look at what he did!

My *kôan* today and in the days to come, after my anger at Yoko, will be: seek and beg for the power of absolute forgiveness. Forgive the worst offense.

Forgive the most abject crimes. Vanish in relinquishing your desire for vengeance and requital and retribution.

THE DEATH OF KÔCHA

Kôcha died this morning, Easter Sunday, after a brief illness. Except that the hidden illness was not that brief in fact. It must have mined and undermined Kôcha's body for weeks. The visible cause of the illness was a tumor that grew on Kôcha's left foot, exactly at the base of the tarsus, then quickly spread to the area where the middle and inner toes are joined. The tumor was not conspicuous until Kôcha worked on it with her bill one afternoon, making it bleed. I caught her and cleaned the wound and put some povidone-iodine solution on it; that seemed to help since the wound stopped bleeding and began to heal after a couple of days, turning into a callous scar. Kôcha went on living for two or three weeks after that first wound. She went on living slowly though, at half speed, never coming greedily or joyously after feed as the rest of the fowl did, approaching with a slow and detached gait, voiceless, not limping, just sluggish and disinterested. Even Dannasama had to chase her and force her to have sex with him; his ego, being threatened by the astonished gaze of Yoko and Akai at the sight of Kôcha's rejection of him, made Dannasama rape her in fact. That was a beastly affair when, enraged, he finally pinned her to the ground, fastening his bill to the back of her neck while Kôcha just sprawled in the dust, letting him quench his desire and fury and gain more respect in the eyes of the other hens. He couldn't have known that Kôcha was very ill and suffering. And even had he known, what difference would it have made? Poor Kôcha stood up, humiliated and sad, and moved slowly to one corner of the yard, and sat there for a long time.

Yesterday I found traces of blood all over the yard. It wasn't Kôcha who started pecking again on that tumor in her foot. Akai and Yoko did it. They went at it in turns. Akai would peck hard and fast, tasting the blood and evidently relishing it; then Yoko, who was now the true mistress of the poultry yard because of her covey, would take her turn, drilling at that wound, efficient and ruthless as seems to be her nature until her beak was smeared in blood; then, for good measure, Yoko would swing at her victim for a couple of times in the wing or flank or neck, hooking her bill on Kôcha's body and pulling, seething and groaning and fierce as if she hated her with a passion.

Kôcha stood there, strangely passive, letting the two hens lick and consume her blood, their bills tainted and ridiculous with it. The old quarry syndrome. The same goes for humans. The bleeding quarry becomes the receptacle into which all rage and guilt and shame and vice and cruelty are drained and outpoured. The smell of blood attracting the sharks. Old story. But with humans it is different, more subtle. The blood doesn't have to be visible. Inward bleeding is enough, like a breakdown or a loss or chagrin. Then human sharks will rush and do their job. Dannasama never touched that wound or even approached it. He must not be interested in gore.

I isolated Kôcha, putting her in the tool-shed with plenty of feed and drink. She didn't weigh much. I touched her legs and breast but there was hardly any flesh left. It had melted away, leaving the bones and skin masked by the still healthy gray and black feathers sprinkled with a little gold in the neck area. I could see it was too late. She sprawled with her tumefied foot athwart under her, drinking a lot, not eating. Her bowel-movement consisted of greenish whitish yellowish liquid muck with a poisonous stink to it. When Kôcha first arrived she was healthier and more beautiful than the other hens. I could tell by the look of her droppings which were firm and of a natural color. Now there she lay, defenseless and quite sick; I couldn't do much for her either. Who ever heard of a hen with cancer being taken to the vet? And what could the latter do anyway?

Kôcha's last moments were sad indeed. Seeing her terrible loneliness in the seclusion of the tool-shed, I put her back with the other fowl, at least at night, when Akai and Yoko wouldn't bother her after a long and busy day. Last evening I let her out of the shed and she walked her slow walk and managed to perch near Akai on the stone elevation initially intended for planting flowers. Kôcha spent her last night on the perch, but she never left it next morning. At eight o'clock, around feeding time, I found her still in her place, blinking once in a while, breathing lightly and slowly, but still alive, though obviously in the last throes of her agony. I let her be, fed the rest of the fowl and went about my own work. At eleven I went to the yard with some heads of lettuce that I had shredded in the kitchen. Chickens love lettuce. I looked first at Kôcha. She was still sitting in her place, but going fast I could tell. She was breathing hard, her lower jaw and throat moving fast; her eyelids were closed and would only open if I approached or spoke to her; then they would close again. Her eyes were bright, with their usual vermilion color and full of irony

and a mockish glint I thought. Her eyelashes, though scarce, were curled and pretty. I went on feeding the lively and indifferent covey. Then I heard what I had vaguely expected: a small outcry and Kôcha dropped dead. I took her body gingerly and wrapped it in old newspapers before putting it in the trash bin. Her eyes were shut with the definite and irrevocable stamp of death; her crown and auriculars had already lost their crimson color and were turning a dirty purple.

Kôcha had been the most gentle of the hens. She had the last grade in power, having come after Akai, and having been supplanted by Yoko because of the latter's brood and motherly respectability. Kôcha had been picked on until she remained alone on her perch in those last moments before her fall into the realm of death and infinite darkness. None of the hens seemed to miss her or needed to take advantage of her bleeding any longer. Dannasama shrieked wildly, hours after her death, seeming to remember, in his stupid pride, that he preferred her to the other hens. But she was gone. Forever and ever. And he didn't seem to know or care.

Now, why did Kôcha's death on this Easter Sunday make me think of the death of my mother? I certainly admired Kôcha's way of dying: serene and dignified and brave, with a load of humorous mocking glint in her eyes until the ultimate moment when the curtain dropped, infinitely thick and opaque! Why was my mother always moaning and complaining, shamming illness to test her children's sympathy until the real moment when she could no longer pretend and use selfishness and blackmail to receive attention, and she had to die that pathetic death, boring like an unwanted guest, never having loved anyone but herself?

ENDING
OR
DELIVERANCE

Thanatos has only been a riddle because of fear, because of covetousness and greed, because of forgetfulness that death is nothing but the ticket price for entering the fun-house, the circus-show of life. Of course the entry into the fun-house is free through sex; and the exit is when you pay good old Thanatos. What's more, you're never warned beforehand that the circus is not at all that funny, that the story of evil will permeate the show, that hell is included

with the free entrance; and before long you'll start lamenting the inconvenience of having been born at all; however, the exit is never far and you know the way to it; or, once again, why not invent the ideal show beyond? With life forever and luxurious vegetation and cool limpid rivers endlessly rolling away, with milk and honey galore. But before landing in some deservedly perfect paradise, let's face hell *ici-bas*.

On December 6, 1949, in the prison of Pitesti, a small town northwest of Bucharest (or Buceresti), an original experiment was carried out: how to turn victims of torture into systematic and highly efficient torturers. Eugen Turcanu, an adamant fascist until 1944, embraced communism with the zeal of a neophyte. He was thrown into the Pitesti prison because of his fascist history; but in order to redeem himself in the eyes of his communist masters, he organized the torture of all anti-communist prisoners, pushing them into the limbo area of not-life, not-death where they completely lost their humanity. Eugen Turcanu made a void inside them, emptying them of whatever they cherished and valued until they were born again, blank and ready to torture others, graduating from victims to executioners. The torturers and their victims lived in the same cells; their work was carried out around the clock, with well-organized shifts as in a steel-mill; suicide was out of the question. This transformational routine destroyed any sense of life, death, good, evil. Eugen Turcanu was secretly "judged" and executed. Apparently he left a two-thousand page confession detailing his deeds, but it must still be buried in some secret police archives.

Then again, look at the British and the first concentration camp in the Union of South Africa; look at those behind the opium war in China; look at the French concentration camps in Algeria where political prisoners fighting for the independence of their country were forced to do unspeakable things to each other in the open arenas of the camps under the resplendent sun, while the rest of the prisoners watched, learning a lesson, knowing what was awaiting them if they didn't betray their fellows and sing long live French Algeria. The French knew, for instance, that having political prisoners and leaders sodomized in public was worse than death. This public sodomy business, however, is not strictly a French invention. A Mameluk king in Egypt initiated this goody and had trained experts inflict it upon his opponents and enemies. The French experimented with live native Algerians (*indigènes*) when they exploded their first atom bomb in the South of Algeria. They wanted to

see the effect the bomb would have on those guinea-pigs. The U.N. and Human Rights didn't seem to know or care. The Japanese killed more Chinese people in Hunan than the atom bomb killed Japanese people in Hiroshima. And the Chinese, during Mao's Cultural Revolution, pushed torture and cruelty to comic limits: some Cultural Revolution torturers cooked and ate their victims.

The Buddha, when he was living in Kammasadamma, a Kuru market-town, thus addressed a congregation of monks: "And again, monks, as if a monk sees a body discarded in the charnel-ground, being devoured by crows, hawks, vultures, herons, dogs, leopards, tigers, jackals or by various kinds of worms, he then applies his attention to his own body thus: 'Truly, this body of mine too is the same nature; it will become like that and will not escape from it. . . .'"

The Zen sect of Buddhism goes further. In the *Rinsairoku*, in a chapter on Popular Enlightenment, it is stated that: "When ye meet the Buddha, kill the Buddha! When ye meet your ancestor, kill your ancestor! When ye meet a disciple of Buddha, kill the disciple! When ye meet your father and mother, kill your father and mother! When ye meet your kin, kill your kin! Only thus will ye attain deliverance."

Taking a break from my meditation I go to the yard to be with the rooster and the hens and the covey of chicks. The chicks are growing fine and thriving by the minute, what with the cod-liver oil and the vitamins and iodine and powdered carbo ligni that I mix with their daily wet mash. Now I can tell the little cocks. They are barely five weeks old and already flying and pecking at each other, already cruel and vicious. Sometimes they fight for no reason, just for the fun of power and leadership; at other times they fight for a speck of grub. I also watch Dannasama do his duty and lovingly mount Yoko or Akai as the fancy moves him, singing his double note, fanning out his gorgeous wing. Once in a while I grab my Leica and take pictures of these scenes of love and hate and joy and survival; and in my inner collectedness I say amen to the Creator of the universe.