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Cave Canem

translated by Stefan Tobler

Some days there is not even anything in me to be deciphered. I say this sentence to myself again and again as I'm standing on one of the watchtower's platforms and looking out over the sea of houses stretching away below me. *Some days.* The hustle and bustle, hundreds of yards down there, spreads out on both sides of the high building for several miles. At regular intervals further towers appear, the remains of a monumental wall. The cities that established themselves around the wall's foundations merged over the centuries into a single metropolis, a city on the very border of an empire which was feeling its age and groaning like a sick old woman. *There is not even anything in me.* The air on this winter day is cold and clear. You can see all the way to the one-time border, which is easy to make out along the course of a river, and to the abandoned army base, which is less easy to recognize by now. Although it was claimed that the armed troops, who were supposed to provide security during the last civil wars in the neighbouring country, had been at home here, nothing was left of that dubitable comfort except for concrete ruins. For a whole variety of reasons no one approached the ruins. Only rust remained, which the last conflict left behind like all the others had. It also left a multitude of unfinished stories of fate and its cruel turns. Like silent watchmen, the towers, which couldn't be torn down, were reminders of the catastrophe which had been survived or just ignored, and which had taken place in the immediate vicinity. Their shadows appear to offer something like simple comfort and a non-committal silence. Nobody, as far as I know, had ever spoken up against them. They stood for the unity of the Elders, who simply couldn't be refused anything once they had carried out these projects. As if they were speaking – which they didn't and we don't – one single, incomparable and, not least for that reason, perfect language that could never be forgotten. No one, as far as I know, has ever asked what happened to that dream. *To be deciphered.* I traced the neglected fragments, the gaps and the memory of how I had felt in this and the other towers I had visited, how even as a young man I had imagined that some of their former importance must still stick to

them, like the dirt in the cracks of the massive blocks of stone. One unsuccessful attempt followed another, yet the text I hoped for just didn't come – a text like a shell striking a wall and bringing a sharp-edged rain of clarity with it. Unable at first to compromise and held back by all that I knew, I struggled to cobble together a first manuscript. It was about the towers and the foreign country which today is so easy to see and inviting, and yet which I have never visited out of a mixture of fear and inertia. With the feeling of having slept for a long time, and the certainty that I would reap mocking scorn and even hate for my arguments, I took the thick pile of paper to the post, packed my travelling bag and then, as had become my habit in the last years, walked to the next tower.

Owing to the age of the towers and the absence of repairs (which can't be carried out as the towers' plans haven't been found and their construction just hasn't been understood), the towers are in the process of vanishing, of a creeping decay. The gods that are still so present in people's beliefs have left the towers; they have simply found another home, yet their shadows remain. There are – a recurring complaint – no longer powerful people to marry or wars to wage; history is continued on credit at our expense, just for the headlines. The world is one that has forgotten to bury its myths and passions, which rot away in front of everyone's eyes. People train their gaze steadily on themselves. We have no idea who lives three doors down from us. I'm no exception. Nevertheless I find it almost comforting that in the midst of this madness and these barely describable things, I have managed to find more than one clear thought. The limited dimensions of tradition mirror themselves in a world in which I have rubbed myself raw. While the evening slowly spreads upwards and the foreign country that lies there enticingly gradually blurs, the feeling returns of an unbearable transition phase. Everything, or perhaps it's only me, is stretched to breaking point. In this darkened present time, which seems solely focused on coming to terms with things and which I can now scarcely interpret, am I moving among the living or the dead? The lights in the city come on one after another. An early rocket climbs into the sky, heralding the coming new year. It explodes and liberates a short-lived mist of shining green sparks. For one moment, like a signal, the sky is more illuminated. I don't actually want to celebrate, but my

friend Publius is no doubt already waiting in front of my flat, to drag me to one of tonight's numerous parties.

Publius, who likes to see himself as *my older self*, is indeed already waiting at the entrance when I get to the street. He's already in costume – a sagging general's uniform sits unconvincingly on his gaunt old body – and without so much as a hello he holds out a black mask as soon as he sees me. It will cover the upper half of my face for the rest of the evening. He knows my antipathy towards fancy dress, but instead of just letting me be, he makes one attempt after another to convert me to the joys of disguise. His hug is hearty and strong; I invite him inside. Publius: that's an unusual name for the correspondingly unconventional life that this once neglected and now rehabilitated writer lives, completely undaunted. He himself says he's a dirty saint. He retains events by forgetting them, that's his strength. Not least for that reason, there isn't a rumour that hasn't been spread about him, nor one which approximates to his reality. Without his encouragement I would have given up my research long ago, might have escaped to a university chair in the capital, or worse. Without him, I realize this again and again when I see him, I would have been lost, I would have simply vanished, extinguished like a secondary figure in a concealed main plot which is only apparent once everything has already happened. An impatient exclamation from the front room reminds me that we're pressed for time, and I'm still standing undecidedly in front of my large wardrobe. It offers little by way of variety. Grey and black – they're the colours of this century, and no doubt of the next one. To show a bare minimum of willingness, I pull on a big winter coat with a fur collar. I inherited it from my grandfather and have never thrown it away. My gaze into the full-length mirror on the wall beside the wardrobe presents a thin figure to me, so small he looks like he's disappearing, in a black item of clothing that is so out of fashion that it's almost fashionable again. Publius, who today looks even more tired and drained than usual, nods to me from the hall. Yes, that'll do, that's fine. *Some days.*

My publisher, like Publius one of the last exemplars of an enchanted world, stands at the bar and sways cautiously in time with the loud music. He's dressed

somewhat plausibly as a satyr. His thinning hair has been combed back, no doubt partly to cover the bald patches on his head. Seeing me, he smiles and raises his glass to me. His look tells me that he knows the long-promised book is now finished, maybe he has even received the package. Relief and sadness mingle in his eyes. I shake his hand and instead of responding to my greeting, in spite of the music and all the guests, he launches into his speech again – the one he has given so many times already, about how, in the end, stories will take the place of the old order, and what a relief and lively chaos that will bring. What velocity and lift we would gain. I've heard these words often enough. Sometimes they were directed at me personally, sometimes at a meeting's audience, or at a young woman he was hoping to impress. I have nothing against him, but I don't want to hear the same old story yet again, so I shake his hand firmly and leave him to his drinks. The mixture of music and crowds causes a kind of irritation, of disorientation. People are so caught up in themselves that I can observe them without hesitation. I can imagine how the neighbourhoods I walk through all collapse here into a contemporary underworld, a hell that has no need of our powers of imagination. I can make out Publius at the other end of the dance floor; he's chatting to guests from the country beyond the border; even in their well-chosen costumes you can – so people say – always recognize them easily. He waves me over. I force myself through the dancers, holding up my wine glass. He introduces me to three other writers whom he met in exile, they have come as knights, and to a young woman dressed as a blind soothsayer; she came along with the three knights. He jokes about our names and their literary meanings, particularly my name, which he finds even more amusing and unusual than his own. It inspires a wild flood of puns from him. She asks what my name is, as if she hadn't heard any of what Publius said, and smiles when I tell her. Her accent and her shining black hair reveal her as a foreigner; her movements are quick and sure. I ask myself the whole time, not least because of her opaque glasses, if she's really in fancy dress. *There is not even anything in me.* Publius and one of the authors wander off, swaying; the other two are deep in conversation. It's almost too loud here for an embarrassing silence, but only almost.

A little table nearby becomes free and we sit down. She looks at me for a long time, without saying anything, and then asks me frankly for my *opinion about the future*. For a moment I am tempted to give her a serious answer, something about the impossibility of exact forecasts, and to tell her my hunch that we're on the verge of being devoured. Instead I attempt a joke and state that I think the future's overrated. She smiles gently and understandingly, as you would to a child who is stubbornly trying to play the role of an adult in order to ward off an unwanted insight. She draws a deck of cards from one of her coat pockets in a flowing movement. As she begins to shuffle the old and dog-eared cards, she explains the game's meaning. *The Tarot, she begins, contains the possibility of disguise, of play, of life*. The cards rub against each other, sounding like bits of wood. *There are a multitude of theories, all of them unproven, she continues, but they all share a common attraction: a belief in stories, for however long, until finally something like truth is the only thing left*. She puts three cards face down on the tabletop, laying the remaining stack down beside them and taking my right hand. Her grasp is firm but not unpleasant. *It's never the individual cards, she says, rather it's the continually new connections between them, the combinations that arise*. In the midst of the crowd swarming happily around us, a moment of concentration forms here, as if the babble of the party had retreated from our table. She turns over the first card. Without looking at the card she asks me what I see. *It's number sixteen, the tower, I reply. I can see a high, dark building, flames, flashes and books*. She nods, *yes*, she nods again. *That's the past, but drastic changes are coming for you. Something is collapsing, you can expect stormy times*. She turns over the second card, asks me again about the image. *Number nine, the hermit, I reply truthfully. There is a man wearing a hat on the card, one black and one white hand, a tree in the background*. She nods again, smiling briefly, is obviously enjoying the chance to act out her role. *That's the present, the description of a search, but it also means distance and solitude*. She lays her right palm on the card briefly. *Perhaps also a time of maturing*. She pauses, then draws her hand back. *And now the third card, looking into the future*. She turns over the card. It's the lovers, a couple bathed in fiery red, their bodies distinguishable and their heads melting together. I hesitate, on a sudden impulse I don't want to tell her the card's name. *So?* she asks, somewhat impatiently. I try

to remember other symbols of this game that I know so well from my younger days and blurt out *Star*. She frowns, but doesn't look at the cards. For a moment she's completely quiet, then she starts to describe the card. *Number seventeen, the star. A woman's torso, jugs of water, the calm after the storm.* Once again, in the ritual gesture, she lays her hand on the card. *The star stands for clarity, for emotional openness. Unless,* and here she takes a dramatic pause, *the card is upside-down, inverting its meaning.* She nods again, gathers up the cards and slips the complete deck back into her coat. *Is that all?* she asks. In this artificial light, the shadow she throws is full of mystery. *Some days there is not even anything in me to be deciphered,* I answer automatically. As far as I can tell, she remains unimpressed by my carefully prepared statement, which – as soon as I have spoken – sounds ruder and more inappropriate than it was intended to be.

In the course of the evening, the room fills up further. I even dance a little. The wine takes effect and is relaxing my studiedly casual expression, when suddenly one of the guests standing on the other side of the room pulls out a gun and fires several shots into the air. Now it really is time to go, we push our way outside without paying any attention to what is going on around us. Instinctively she takes my hand and continues to hold on tight to me when we squeeze into one of the waiting taxis with a group of people, which includes a ghostly pale Publius and two of the authors. We drive off, the driver doesn't care that his car is far too full. It's still noisy. Everybody is excited and tipsy, and only as we get farther from the club does it quieten down inside. In as much as space allows it, the people sink back into the upholstery. She gives the driver an address in the suburbs; we are en route for a once elegant, now dilapidated quarter.

The car stops, I can't say exactly where, and we tumble out into the night air. We're standing in front of a villa that has been abandoned, as we find out, and yet which is still partly furnished. It looks as if some furniture had been selected at random and taken, and the rest simply left here. Scattered around the rooms, candles illuminate the scenery. There are considerably more people here; a further, wilder party is happening here. I find myself in a little drawing room with a few other people. There are some comfortable sofas, framed by empty

bookcases that reach up to the high ceiling. She goes ahead of me, still wearing her glasses in spite of the murky light. She moves through the room with an ease all her own, which still irritates me, and fishes a tin from her pocket. She takes a small fibrous lump and some paper from the tin. The paper looks like part of a page of a book. Then she passes the box on and begins to recite a poem: *Do you remember how desolate the train stations looked, we drove through cities that spun and spun all day. Others murmur in agreement, as if this were a ritual, a necessary and normal procedure before what is to follow, and in the nights we broken open the days' sun, O sailors, O inconsolable women and you, my companions, a myth that has to be repeated to keep it from growing tired, remember that.* She rolls a joint and beckons me into another room, dotted with more items of furniture. We sit on a couch; I have an apprehension of her scent, a mixture of wood and honey. She passes me the lit joint; its smoke fills my lungs. I'm not used to it. After just a few drags I feel dizzy, but not unpleasantly so. Sitting next to one another, we try to continue our conversation. There's no need to lie, so we talk freely and without any ulterior motives. She tells me about her home village, about the little town near the one time border where she now lives, far from her family, because she wanted to go somewhere where you don't get insulted. She jumps from one theme to another, talks about a God she can believe in because he knows how to dance, about spices and how to dress perfectly. I speak about the bloody history I'm dedicated to because it's the only one I seem to be familiar with, about my senses' justifiable unease, as if around the unknown inside me there was knowledge still to be unlocked. We talk about life, how it was and how we'd like it to be, about values and the weight of suffering, about the guilt of the old and the responsibility of the young. All this keeps a light tone, even when the moment comes when everything seems to have been said. She takes me by the hand, and I let it happen, as if in a scene from something I'd read, and I were now only laying my memory over the present to cover it, instead of actually experiencing it.

Between our speculations and getting undressed, we decide on the latter. Our mouths and hands are ahead of our thoughts. She pulls me closer to her with surprising strength and with a feeling of drunken familiarity, as if it had never

been any different or easier than now, and I respond to her touches. She stands up, pulls me onwards, *Come*, that's all she says, there's no need to say more. We stumble into the next room. In my uncertainty and awkwardness I count my steps. Sleeping bags are strewn everywhere here, across the floor and on an old bed. I slip out of my coat, she tugs at my mask, my shirt, I almost tear off her top's right sleeve. We're not just hungry, we're gluttonous. Every pause, every ounce of learnt sensibleness is overcome as we fall on the bed laughing and with more energy than I am used to. Her body is brown, softer than I had expected, while here in the dim light emitted from the neighbouring room I feel like a pale bony fish that has been washed up on land. She holds my eyes closed as I slide down her; she lies there like an open letter, tasting both salty and sweet. Then I kiss her hips, until she pulls my head back up to hers again, grabs my backside and presses me to her. The first time is rushed. We move together, driven, fleeing, unable to move from the spot, until she briefly arches into me, scratches me. Then she straddles me, decisively placing her slim hands on my chest. The second time is calmer, clearer. We don't care if anyone sees us. Only holding each other is important, as if we had to escape tiredness. Still embracing, we stretch out towards each other; we fall asleep in the confusion of textiles.

A draught of cold air wakes me. The wind has pushed open the window and is letting a little snow in. I jump up and close it. Only then do I realize I'm naked. The old grandfather clock, leaning against the wall like a silent watchman, has caught my eye. The hands must have stopped long ago. I'm reflected in the case's glass, an unreal and ghostly apparition with dark traces of spontaneous passion on my neck and shoulders. I turn towards the bed. As was to be expected, I'm alone. She has gone. At the top end of her sleeping bag lies the *Lovers* tarot card. In the clear light of the first morning of the New Year, I hurriedly get dressed, searching in vain for my mask, and creep out quietly. The other rooms are almost empty. A few people lie around like washed up corpses, some still wrapped around each other, others turning away from each other like strangers. Publius isn't, as far as I can see, among them. Going out, I try not to knock over any of the bottles and glasses on the floor. I almost manage, and I slip out the front door as gracefully as possible. The garden around the house has gone wild and is partly

covered by a thin coating of snow. There's a dog kennel, somewhat to the side of the gate which hangs crookedly from its hinges. The sunlight has uncovered an old, rusty chain, but to my relief there's no sign of a watchdog.

Not nineteen hours have passed since my last visit to the tower. I've returned to it. I'm afraid that the building's stability is actually illusory. I remember the first of the three tarot cards, and reach for the *Lovers* card, which is in my coat pocket. What can one wooer give to the other one, if not a travel plan that leads away from the homeland's confines? The stone of the ledge feels cold. I'm sure that even if the towers were to collapse and vanish one day, their shadows would still fall on us. There's a truth in everything, you have to use questions like levers, to understand things. At least that is clearer than it was. I left a copy of the completed manuscript in Publius' empty house, like a temporarily abandoned child, which might scare the one receiving it. I think about the copy and it feels refreshingly different from moving once again on the edge of a mistake I had got used to. Different and better. My eyes seem to have lost a dullness, but maybe I'm wrong, maybe these too are just borrowed thoughts. Fate, if there is such a thing, never strikes those who are prepared. Blocking out the city below me, my gaze drifts south, the direction I will take and from which I hope to gain experience and be renewed. This isn't a race that will be decided on speed; it might be a new day.