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English IV - Writing

17 Jan 2020

A Portrait of the Spaniard as an Old Man

Stone streets, dappled with the moisture of a small cleaning truck’s apologetic, fruitless hosing-down, still exhumed the fragrance of a medieval city, as did the dense, Romanesque-style buildings, with each stone’s unique, fingerprint burn mark. Perhaps they were from ancient, gallant wars of imperialism and conquest; perhaps they were from cigarettes. Perhaps they were etched into the stones to mark them off, to give them identity. A lone palm tree stood in the periphery, affirming the otherwise unseemly mediterranean climate to which this scene actually belonged, and occasionally rustling in synchrony with the wind. One heard quarrelling between young adults in an indiscriminate language, honking on the nearby Via Laietana. But in this enclave, one felt protected from the elements--that the rest of the world could be sensed, but that it would keep itself at arm’s length.

A man was returning home from his early morning walk, carrying himself with an obstinate demeanor, as if his days of defense and justification were over and the world should just accept him in his advanced age. His beige jacket was imprinted with the smell of tobacco, and the colors of his cap were graying and homogenizing. He peddled along the stones, hanging his head and voicelessly muttering to himself.

Above the arched doorway perched the brave Catalan flag, hanging limp from neglect, as if for years on end, passerby had forgotten to bask in its glory.

The man never heeded it any attention. The beauty around him seemed to bear him no consequence, as if it was all familiar and matter of fact.

The man lifted his hand to ring his door, but he stopped, holding it in mid-air, and then dropping it. He turned around to face the world, fumbling from the rank box of cigarettes in his pocket. He put one to his mouth. The smoke didn’t show in the humid air.

Hesitating, listening.

A jackhammer upending the earth. Owls pronouncing themselves. Soccer balls ricocheting against walls, and mothers yelling at their children. The sound came muffled, losing its definition from being catapulted over the walls and down to him.

A crow swooped in from the air, folding out its wings to catch its fall, and quietly perched itself on the railing, blinking lightly, and gazing down upon the street, its feathers crisp and gleaming in the sunlight. It held itself poised, as if ready to evacuate from a startling noise. The man observed the crow.

It ambled along the ledge, aimlessly. After resting into its promontory, the crow straightened its talons, arched its back, let out an unceremonious squak, and then left as unprompted as it came.

Ash from the cigarette dripped into the street’s menial puddles, not dirtying them much more. A street vendor calling beer advertisements out into the reverberant walls of the city. A greyhound dog paced by, bouncing its lank legs, bobbing its head. It held a ball in his mouth, and would tread forward, periodically stopping to check back with its owner. A woman followed closely behind, wheeling her worn grocery cart with the unspoken procession of habit. Its wheels rhythmically struck against the stones, but she gave no sign of hearing it.

He dropped his cigarette onto the ground, and smeared it with his shoe, looking up at the flag, and drawing a deep breath through his nose, turned back towards the door. He rang 7è 2a with articulated deliberateness.

A whole minute.

He rubbed his forehead with his thumb, and tried the button again. After waiting a while, tapping his foot anxiously, the man peered up at the window above. He rang the button again, calling out on the intercom. A curt click of the receiver.

Staring at the door that tested him, he raised his fist and knocked loudly, shouting a woman’s name. The sound of his voice was absorbed by the door. The air around him braced itself. That it was watching him and waiting for him.

A crow flew overhead, squawking. It landed on its cliff and set its eyes at him. Just as the old man started clapping at it to startle it away, the jackhammer sounded again, and the crow scampered away at the onslaught of noise. He looked at the door again, and rang the bell, calling the name and knocking just as loudly. To no avail.

He sat down, crouched at the threshold. He stared out from under his feet, and from the ground came dark spots. A gray cloud that hadn’t been there before loomed over the city. The rain covered the street soon enough, and the man rang once again, but the bell didn’t sound. He recoiled his finger and tilted his head, and then tried it three more times, gritting his teeth. No click. He cursed himself, and sat outside his door.

A dog was barking in the distance. A couple laughing.

An old woman in the apartment had just woken up from rain splattering on the walls. She walked over to the window and peered outside. It looked empty. The man was right under the doorway, sheltering himself from the rain. She turned away from the window, and went back to bed.

The rain lifted after a couple of minutes. The man at the door, hopelessly rang the intercom, and it made no sound.

After mulling and ruminating, the old Spaniard caught himself, lifted his head, and walked back out into the street. The stones held their weight, invested in their structures. The fronds of the palm tree danced to their own music. In the distance, a construction vehicle was warning of its reversing.

He resolutely scuffed his heel against the wet stones. Looking around himself and smiling, he shrugged his shoulders and headed back down the street. The flag gave a small wave.