The hour of star

The Author’s Dedication

(alias Clarice Lispector)

 I dedicate this narrative to dear old Schumann and his beloved Clara who are now, alas, nothing but dust and ashes. I dedicate it to the deep crimson of my blood as someone in his prime. I dedicate it, above all, to those gnomes, dwarfs, sylphs, and nymphs who inhabit my life. I dedicate it to the memory of my years of hardship when everything was more austere and honourable, and I had never eaten lobster. I dedicate it to the tempest of Beethoven. To the vibrations of Bach’s neutral colours. To Chopin who leaves me weak. To Stravinsky who terrifies me and makes me soar in flames. To *Death and Transfiguration*, in which Richard Strauss predicts my fate. Most of all, I dedicate it to the day’s vigil and to day itself, to the transparent voice of Debussy, to Marlos Nobre, to Prokofiev, to Carl Orff and Schoenberg, to the twelve-tone composers, to the strident notes of an electronic generation — to all those musicians who have touched within me the most alarming and unsuspected regions; to all those prophets of our age who have revealed me to myself and made me explode into: me. This me that is you, for I cannot bear to be simply me, I need others in order to stand up, giddy and awkward as I am, for what can one do except meditate in order to plunge into that total void which can only be attained through meditation. Meditation need not bear fruit: meditation can be an end in itself. I meditate without words or themes. What troubles my existence is writing.

And we must never forget that if the atom’s structure is invisible, it is none the less real. I am aware of the existence of many things I have never seen. And you too. One cannot prove the existence of what is most real but the essential thing is to believe. To weep and believe. This story unfolds in a state of emergency and public calamity. It is an unfinished book because it offers no answer. An answer I hope someone somewhere in the world may be able to provide. You perhaps? It is a story in technicolour to add a touch of luxury, for heaven knows, I need that too. Amen for all of us.

**The Hour of the Star**

The Blame is Mine

or

The Hour of the Star

or

Let Her Fend for Herself

or

The Right to Protest

or

As for the future.

or

Singing the Blues

or

She Doesn’t Know How to Protest

or

A Sense of Loss

or

Whistling in The Dark Wind

or

I Can Do Nothing

or

A Record of Preceding Events

or

A Tearful Tale

or

A Discreet Exit by the Back Door

Everything in the world began with a yes. One molecule said yes to another molecule and life was born. But before prehistory there was the prehistory of prehistory and there was the never and there was the yes. It was ever so. I do not know why, but I do know that the universe never began.

Let no one be mistaken. I only achieve simplicity with enormous effort.

So long as I have questions to which there are no answers, I shall go on writing. How does one start at the beginning, if things happen before they actually happen? If before the pre-prehistory there already existed apocalyptic monsters? If this history does not exist, it will come to exist. To think is an act. To feel is a fact. Put the two together — it is me who is writing what I am writing. God is the world. The truth is always some inner power without explanation. The more genuine part of my life is unrecognizable, extremely intimate and impossible to define. My heart has shed every desire and reduced itself to one final or initial beat. The toothache that passes through this narrative has given me a sharp twinge right in the mouth. I break out into a strident, high-pitched, syncopated melody. It is the sound of my own pain, of someone who carries this world where there is so little happiness. Happiness? I have never come across a more foolish word, invented by all those unfortunate girls from north-eastern Brazil.

I should explain that this story will emerge from a gradual vision — for the past two and a half years I have slowly started discovering the whys and the wherefores. It is the vision of the imminence of... of what? Perhaps I shall find out later. Just as I am writing at the same time as I am being read. Only I do not start with the ending that would justify the beginning — as death appears to comment on life — because I must record the preceding events.

Even as I write this I feel ashamed at pouncing on you with a narrative that is so open and explicit. A narrative, however, from which blood surging with life might flow only to coagulate into lumps of trembling jelly. Will this story become my own coagulation one day? Who can tell? If there is any truth in it — and clearly the story is true even though invented — let everyone see it reflected in himself for we are all one and the same person, and he who is not poor in terms of money is poor in spirit or feeling for he lacks something more precious than gold — for there are those who do not possess that essential essence.

How do I know all that is about to follow if it is unfamiliar and something I have never experienced? In a street in Rio de Janeiro I caught a glimpse of perdition on the face of a girl from the North-east. Without mentioning that I myself was raised as a child in the North-east. Besides, I know about certain things simply by living. Anyone who lives, knows, even without knowing that he or she knows. So, dear readers, you know more than you imagine, however much you may deny it.

I do not intend to write anything complicated, although I am obliged to use the words that sustain you. The story — I have decided with an illusion of free will — should have some seven characters, and obviously I am one of the more important. I, Rodrigo s.m. A traditional tale for I have no desire to be modish and invent colloquialisms under the guise of originality. So I shall attempt, contrary to my normal method, to write a story with a beginning, a middle, and a “grand finale” followed by silence and falling rain.

A story that is patently open and explicit yet holds certain secrets — starting with one of the book’s titles ‘As For The Future’, preceded and followed by a full stop. This is no caprice on my part — hopefully this need for confinement will ultimately become clear. (The ending is still so vague yet, were my poverty to permit, I should like it to be grandiose.) If, instead of a full stop, the title were followed by dotted lines, it would remain open to every kind of speculation on your part, however morbid or pitiless. It is true that I, too, feel no pity for my main character, the girl from the North-east: I want my story to be cold and impartial. Unlike the reader, I reserve the right to be devastatingly cold, for this is not simply a narrative, but above all primary life that breathes, breathes, breathes. Made of porous material, I shall one day assume the form of a molecule with its potential explosion of atoms. What I am writing is something more than mere invention; it is my duty to relate everything about this girl among thousands of others like her. It is my duty, however unrewarding, to confront her with her own existence.

For one has a right to shout.

So, I am shouting.

A simple shout that begs no charity. I know that there are girls who sell their bodies, their only real possession, in exchange for a good dinner rather than the usual mortadella sandwich. But the person whom I am about to describe scarcely has a body to sell; nobody desires her, she is a harmless virgin whom nobody needs. It strikes me that I don’t need her either and that what I am writing could be written by another. Another writer, of course, but it would have to be a man for a woman would weep her heart out.

There are thousands of girls like this girl from the Northeast to be found in the slums of Rio de Janeiro, living in bedsitters or toiling behind counters for all they are worth. They aren’t even aware of the fact that they are superfluous and that nobody cares a damn about their existence. Few of them ever complain and as far as I know they never protest, for there is no one to listen.

I am warming up before making a start, rubbing my hands together to summon up my courage. I can remember a time when I used to pray in order to kindle my spirit: movement is spirit. Prayer was a means of confronting myself in silence away from the gaze of others. As I prayed I emptied my soul — and this emptiness is everything that I can ever hope to possess. Apart from this, there is nothing. But emptiness, too, has its value and somehow resembles abundance. One way of obtaining is not to search, one way of possessing is not to ask; simply to believe that my inner silence is the solution to my — to my mystery.

It is my intention, as I suggested earlier, to write with ever greater simplicity. Besides, the material at my disposal is all too sparse and mundane, I possess few details about my characters and those details are not very revealing; details that laboriously stem from me only to return to me; the craft of carpentry.

Remember that, no matter what I write, my basic material is the word. So this story will consist of words that form phrases from which there emanates a secret meaning that exceeds both words and phrases. Like every writer, I am clearly tempted to use succulent terms: I have at my command magnificent adjectives, robust nouns, and verbs so agile that they glide through the atmosphere as they move into action. For surely words are actions? Yet I have no intention of adorning the word, for were I to touch the girl’s bread, that bread would turn to gold — and the girl (she is nineteen years old) the girl would be unable to bite into it, and consequently die of hunger. So I must express myself simply in order to capture her delicate and shadowy existence. With humility I confine myself — without making too much fuss about my humility for then it would no longer be humility — I confine myself to narrating the unremarkable adventures of a girl living in a hostile city. A girl who should have stayed in the backwoods of Alagoas wearing a cotton dress and avoiding the typewriter, for she was barely literate and had only received three years of primary schooling. She was so backward that when she typed she was obliged to copy out every word slowly, letter by letter. Her aunt had given her a crash course in typing. As a result, the girl had acquired some dignity: she was a typist at last, even though she appeared to have some difficulty in stringing two consonants together. When she copied out the attractive, rotund handwriting of the boss, whom she idolized, the word ‘designate’ became ‘desiginate’, for that is how she herself would have pronounced it.

Forgive me if I add something more about myself since my identity is not very clear, and when I write I am surprised to find that I possess a destiny. Who has not asked himself at some time or other: am I a monster or is this what it means to be a person?

First of all, I must make it clear that this girl does not know herself apart from the fact that she goes on living aimlessly. Were she foolish enough to ask herself ‘Who am I?’, she would fall flat on her face. For the question ‘Who am I?’ creates a need. And how does one satisfy that need? To probe oneself is to recognize that one is incomplete.

The person of whom I am about to speak is so simpleminded that she often smiles at other people on the street. No one acknowledges her smile for they don’t even notice her.

Coming back to myself: what I am about to write cannot be assimilated by minds that expect much and crave sophistication. For what I am about to express will be quite stark. Although it may have as its background — even now — the tormented shadows that haunt my dreams as I sleep tormented at night. Do not, therefore, expect stars in what follows for nothing will scintillate. This is opaque material and by its very nature it is despised by everyone. This story has no melody that could be rightly termed *cantabile*. Its rhythm is frequently discordant. It also contains facts. I have always been enthusiastic about facts without literature — facts are hard stones and I am much more interested in action than in meditation. There is no way of escaping facts.

I ask myself if I should jump ahead in time and sketch out an ending immediately. As it happens, I have no idea how this story will end. I also realize that I must proceed step by step in accordance with a period of time measured in hours: even animals struggle with time. This, too, is my first condition; to proceed slowly notwithstanding my impatience to tell you about this girl.

In writing this story, I shall yield to emotion and I know perfectly well that every day is one more day stolen from death. In no sense an intellectual, I write with my body. And what I write is like a dank haze. The words are sounds transfused with shadows that intersect unevenly, stalactites, woven lace, transposed organ music. I can scarcely invoke the words to describe this pattern, vibrant and rich, morbid and obscure, its counterpoint the deep bass of sorrow. *Allegro con brio*. I shall attempt to extract gold from charcoal. I know that I am holding up the narrative and playing at ball without a ball. Is the fact an act? I swear that this book is composed without words: like a mute photograph. This book is a silence: an interrogation.

I suspect that this lengthy preamble is intended to conceal the poverty of my story, for I am apprehensive. Before this typist entered my life, I was a reasonably contented chap despite my limited success as a writer. Things were somehow so good that they were in danger of becoming very bad because what is fully mature is very close to rotting.

But the idea of transcending my own limits suddenly appealed to me. This happened when I decided to write about reality, since reality exceeds me. Whatever one understands by reality. Will what I am about to narrate sound mushy? It has that tendency but I am determined to sound dry and severe. At least what I am writing begs no favours or assistance from anyone: so-called sorrow is borne with the dignity of an aristocrat.

It seems that I am changing my style of writing. Not being a professional writer, I please myself what I write about — and I must write about this girl from the North-east otherwise I shall choke. She points an accusing finger and I can only defend myself by writing about her. I tend to write with bold, severe strokes like a painter. I shall struggle with facts as if they were those impossible stones which I mentioned earlier. How I should love to hear the pealing of bells in order to work up some enthusiasm as I decipher reality: to see angels flutter like transparent wasps around my fevered head, this head that longs to be ultimately transformed into an object-thing, because so much more simple.

Is it possible that actions exceed words? As I write — let things be known by their real names. Each thing is a word. And when there is no word, it must be invented, This God of yours who commanded us to invent.

Why do I write? First of all because I have captured the spirit of the language and at times it is the form that constitutes the content. I write, therefore, not for the girl from the North-east but for the much more serious reason of *force majeure*, or as they say in formal petitions by ‘force of law’.

My strength undoubtedly resides in solitude. I am not afraid of tempestuous storms or violent gales for I am also the night’s darkness. Even though I cannot bear to hear whistling or footsteps in the dark. Darkness? It reminds me of a former girlfriend. She was sexually experienced and there was such darkness inside her body. I have never forgotten her: one never forgets a person with whom one has slept. The event remains branded on one’s living flesh like a tattoo and all who witness the stigma take flight in horror.

I now want to speak of the girl from the North-east. It’s as follows: like some vagrant bitch she was guided entirely by her own remote control. For she had reduced herself to herself. After successive failures, I have also reduced myself, but I still want to discover the world and its God.

I should like to add some details about the young girl and myself; we live exclusively in the present because forever and eternally it is the day of today, and the day of tomorrow will be a today. Eternity is the state of things at this very moment.

See how apprehensive I have become since putting down words about the girl from the North-east. The question is: how do I write? I can verify that I write by ear, just as I learned English and French by ear. My antecedents as a writer? I am a man who possesses more money than those who go hungry, and this makes me in some ways dishonest. I only lie at the precise hour of lying. But when I write I do not lie. What else? Yes, I belong to no social category, marginal as I am. The upper classes consider me a strange creature, the middle classes regard me with suspicion, afraid that I might unsettle them, while the lower classes avoid me.

No, it is not easy to write. It is as hard as breaking rocks. Sparks and splinters fly like shattered steel.

I am scared of starting. I do not even know the girl’s name. It goes without saying that this story drives me to despair because it is too straightforward. What I propose to narrate sounds easy and within everyone’s grasp. But its elaboration is extremely difficult. I must render clear something that is almost obliterated and can scarcely be deciphered. With stiff, contaminated fingers I must touch the invisible in its own squalor.

Of one thing I am certain: this narrative will combine with something delicate: the creation of an entire human being who is as much alive as I am. I have taken care of her because my mandate is simply to reveal her presence so that you may recognize her on the street, moving ever so cautiously because of her quivering frailty. And should my narrative turn out to be sad? Later, I shall almost certainly write something more cheerful, but why cheerful? Because I, too, am a man of hosannas and perhaps one day I shall intone praises instead of the misfortunes of the girl from the North-east.

Meantime, I want to walk naked or in rags; I want to experience at least once the insipid flavour of the Host. To eat communion bread will be to taste the world’s indifference, and to immerse myself in nothingness. This will be my courage: to abandon comforting sentiments from the past.

There is little comfort now. In order to speak about the girl I mustn’t shave for days. I must acquire dark circles under my eyes from lack of sleep: dozing from sheer exhaustion like a manual labourer. Also wearing threadbare clothes. I am doing all this to put myself on the same footing as the girl from the North-east. Fully aware that I might have to present myself in a more convincing manner to societies who demand a great deal from someone who is typing at this very moment.

Yes, all this, for history is history. But knowing beforehand so as never to forget that the word is the fruit of the word. The word must resemble the word. To attain the word is my first duty to myself. The word must not be adorned and become aesthetically worthless; it must be simply itself. It is also true that I have attempted to acquire a certain refinement of feeling and that this extreme refinement should not break into a perpetual line. At the same time, I have attempted to imitate the deep, raw, dense sound of the trombone, for no good reason except that I feel so nervous about writing that I might explode into a fit of uncontrollable laughter. I want to accept my freedom without reaching the conclusion like so many others: that existence is only for fools and lunatics: for it would seem that to exist is illogical.

The action of this story will result in my transfiguration into someone else and in my ultimate materialization into an object. Perhaps I might even acquire the sweet tones of the flute and become entwined in a creeper vine.

 Tradução: Giovanni Pontiero