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And the Dancer, Dancing

JOSE V. AYALA

"...the dance must in no wise be regarded as a mark of reverence for vanity and luxury, but as something which uplifts every living body... But thou, when thou comest to the the font, do thou lift up thy hands. Thou art exhorted to show swifter feet in order that thou mayest ascend to everlasting life..."—St. Ambrose

IN this cell I occupy, measuring six paces on all sides, there is silence, blessed silence, such an exactitude of silence that the passage of thought may be held in one's own hand and weighed, detaching each strand, tracing a beginning, middle and ending. Present in this room of space is a pallet, a hard pallet, unencumbered of pillows, mats, mosquito netting and the trivialities of bed which make sleep a burden. There are no tongues here to wag at time, not even a pinhead to mar the refuge afforded by these four walls—walls that have acquired a translucent quality — allowing the gradual focus of the mind to fix itself on a point for reference until translucence is transformed to clarity. It is an immensity away from time and circumstance. There is a freedom, all pervading, universal, so unlike the freedom once possessed in the physical choice of masks to wear. The change of body, through pain into soul, has been the slow turning of firmament and galaxy into universe. Three quadrants of time have I travelled and the fourth awaits. The passage of parallel light rays converge into a positive unity. For the last time I re-trace images, the better to grasp the closeness still to be gained.

The day that the Enemy finally caught me, there was a hammering in my head that set off an infernal ringing through the bone. I made an effort to stop the vicious throbbing with mud-stained hands, but gained no respite. The violent din swept every thought of flight. Sweat ran down old channels in answer to obstinate fear. I felt everything around me stopped, jelled, except for the giddy speed with which mind whirled. The few seconds lost pinned me down in the center of the Enemy's nursed streams of fire from burning guns. Triangular patches of eagle and snake gleamed signs of victory by swamplight. Heat clenched machine guns chattered Death at all points of the compass, except down to earth where slime oozed iridescent oils of living.

Silence followed. I was prodded out of the womb with bayonet teeth, wrenched from twining vines, slapped into defenceless open with gun butts. Now I was aware that there were others. Four, seven, ten, eleven other men were scattered around, shivering like the new-born, herded into a group, pushed along. In single file we began the journey past tidal flats.

The throbbing in my head ended with a chill in the stomach. The dreaded question—what now?—churned prolific rumors of refined torture. Refined torture: these words were repeated. Each time I thought of casual objects: refined sugar, refined alcohol. 'Refined' also carried a genteel connotation of manners, of people so out of place in the swamp mud. I tried to discipline thoughts into logical order. Instead I lost myself in the rhythm of wading through tepid water. The liquid trailing of feet widened into ripples. Sun-hours later we reached the quiet bay where the large river flowed. Sand and silt formed deltas of network channels where the sea advanced and receded with the passage of day.

There was rain at twilight. We reached the coast where a boat waited to ferry us across. A soft effulgence over the bay and the sea breeze evoked the guardians of existence: faith, hope and charity. Sure enough we were allowed to rest on the beach. Munificence upon munificence! We were fed with a thin gruel that was streaked with gray, oddly flavored

flesh. One of the guards prodded me with a rifle. He smiled and kept repeating: "Good . . . good." The other men elbowed each other and begged for additional dole-outs. A prisoner who succeeded in getting his tin plate refilled turned and said to me: "It's free, you know," while lapping up choice bits. The broken end of what seemed like the amber filamented wing of a chitin-covered insect was stuck to his chin. But the onrushing darkness disguised this detail, merging it with the shadow of his face. This made me even more hesitant to eat the food which the Enemy so generously provided.

As a child I had always been told never to trust the Enemy. The narrow words of Father often created so great an uncertainty as to cause me embarrassment. His precept: "familiarities are justified by acceptance of offers from strangers." This evening, however, the wily demands of swelling hunger disputed and seduced whatever reservations I may have had. My aversion became hypocritical and incomprehensible, utterly superficial. I lost faith in the childish precept of distrust. I overcame my atavistic fear. I joined in the simple and peaceful act of eating forbidden flesh.

Father forgive me, but I did eat and enjoyed the eating, breathing in the very musk that repelled me, revelling as in the return of an exile to native ground.

The Enemy summed up my yielding with the word BROTHER. In his eyes was a gleam—joy or unholy mockery—it was difficult to tell which predominated the most. Flames coiled and flared in his eyes.

* * *

There was dull fire against a brass sky reflected from the horizon when the Enemy finally brought us overland to a promontory of granite. Stone slopes radiated like the spokes of a gigantic wheel towards three horizontal layers of weathered rock flung up to the sky. At the highest point there was a blurring, suggestive of another level farther up. All too soon this pinnacle disappeared against the improbable height sensed by foreshortened vision. Distance made forms evasive. Now an alabastrine city shimmered. Now an old tower surrounded by embattled walls appeared. Now a pillar of salt

stood atop a burning mountain. Now there was only an empty space on a wind-swept plateau.

The air of the plateau was so cold it sucked the heat of the body. Cheeks stretched with vibrant tautness and lips puckered into leather. What now? I asked the Enemy: guardian and provider.

"You have been chosen," the Enemy said. "You above all men are fortunate. Few are called and fewer still are chosen. Like a father you must lead your sons to salvation. See to it that none are lost in the night. Help them to overcome all indolent illusions of immediacy, all worldly expressions of triviality. That which you think you possess, you possess not; and that which you possess not, possesses you."

The Enemy bound us into a chain with mooring ropes. Their hands pointed towards the distant chord of granite prison and horizon. "We shall be watching you at all hours," the Enemy said. They held up a black enamelled spy glass whose complex lenses were calibrated with golden numerical variations of the figure eight. "Go with Faith," the Enemy said in parting.

There was not one shred of pity in the cloak of compassion which the Enemy used for hiding his face. He had a face so ordinary as to seem vague. It was a remembrance of one's own face, familiar, yet unknown. To obey is to have Faith, the Enemy said. To lead my sons into the wilderness of rock is Faith? To be afraid is Faith? To go forth against reason is Faith? But there were no answers. Not even by a low whisper of conscience did the Enemy show that he had heard the questions. The only promise given was the lofty granite prison.

I led my shivering companions out of the Enemy's embrace into a world of rock and wind. Slowly we took the first faltering footsteps. Movements had to be timed. We were held together by the delicate balance of knotted chain, delimited by the reach of an arm resting on a neighbor's shoulder and the forward, almost equidistant throw of a leg stepping forward.

The first declivity was a narrow gravel trail cut close to the edge of a ravine. The reassuring cliff-side arched overhead, damping off the light of the sky. Gradually a violet tinted shadow settled on the narrow path and on our bodies.

Halfway down I realized that the trail was a labyrinth. There was no turning back. The trail steepened ever downward, curling in and out of crevices where the darkness was intensified by the total absence of wind, becoming pockets of constricted stone.

I felt the way along with back against the wall. The path sheared away from one side forming a ledge. The roof crowded down and I heard a murmur of protest from behind echoed back by the walls: "what's the matter?... the matter?... the matter?"

"We'll have to crawl," I answered. Rocks carried the refrain: "to crawl... to crawl... to crawl..."

The next instant I plunged down a bottomless hole. The second, the third and the fourth man followed in headlong flight. We dangled in the dark, screaming: "BACK BACK BACK! GO BACK!"

The walls screamed: "BACK BACK BACK! GO BACK!"

Thunder drowned out the shouting. The wall cracked and shattered. The empty space was endless, but the mooring rope held, tugged, thrust itself like slow fire against armpits and chest. I felt myself picked up, carried gently away from floating darkness. On solid ground the Enemy's warning was clear: all movements must be made as carefully as possible. The mooring rope must be on at all times.

The space, filled with bodies, was not wide enough to permit the wheeling turn of twelve prisoners. The short slack of the rope would not permit it. I knew nothing of that which lay ahead. Confined to the narrow ledge there was no other recourse but to surrender leadership gladly to the man at the end of the chain. His then the responsibility for finding the way out. His the burden and the PAIN OF BEING THE FIRST TO FALL.

We stepped backwards. Right leg back. Left. Then the right: left-right-left, retracing the narrow passage of the labyrinth. Now a rocky shelf moved forward and outward before us. An overhanging buttress hit the back of the head. Counting the moving walls we lost count. Two paces to the left and backwards again. Beyond was the diagonal shape of a crevice. How long was it since this ant-like labor began? Did time make itself felt only by its absence? How deep was absolute blackness or the terrible echo of footsteps?

The weight of one's own hand transmitted the tremors of another step a thousandfold. Muscles clenched and unclenched. A red, hazy stupor fell. To begin once more without landmarks. Feet dragged in emptiness. An elbow scraped against flint walls. The head was held way back. Hands touched, weaving the dark. Time no longer mattered. Only a craving for light and a lust for rest remained. The subtle Enemy who kept his countenance hidden knew this.

What has happened? Is there no one left to answer? Perhaps the man at the end of the line took the wrong turn and is now dragging us to the bottomless pit. Perhaps there is another passage out of this blind alley. How is it possible that we are lost and the Enemy remains silent? Did he not promise to watch over us for all time? How far back must one travel to see the horizon and its granite promise of hope? How long ago was it when Father led me by the hand, pointing out the ivory likeness of the Enemy beneath which all slaves knelt, pleading and fawning?

"Come, be practical," Father had said. "The first thing is to stand up."

Guided by hand, Father lifted me up from the spit-floor where everyone rolled and adored. The brilliant sun, lording it above all, came through the window.

I had wanted to run away from all low places. Away from the coarse incense of prayers that hugged and choked the morning breeze of distant mountains. Away from streets and houses that grew bigger as I grew smaller. Away from painted faces that crowded age and death into all free spaces. I wanted to

disappear, vanish from the hand that held me up, rooted to Father as I was, loving with intensity. At the same time, I knew that behind every diminutive act of humanity I was at the same moment coldly indifferent. When I should have felt closest to that which I loved, I was actually farthest. When I thought everything was lost, everything was gained. Moving backwards, we moved forward. Chained together, we were more separate than ever. When it was darkest, there was light.

* * *

Sunlight pulsed down from the sky when we emerged from the tunnel near the hub of granite wall that marked the outer boundaries of the Prison. Close to the Eastern wall, the Warden hailed us: "You are early," he said. "I see, you have had a pleasant journey. I am the Warden into whose hands you have been entrusted. I am sure you will all enjoy your stay in the Second Level. Do come in. You might catch your death of cold."

The Warden ushered us through an enamelled white iron door. The door opened into a sandy courtyard reserved for processions of the faithful. Another wall glazed with silver cut a second monumental gate of inlaid turquoise facing the South. Unlike the first courtyard, the second was built of kiln-fired bricks lined with two parallel rows of sacrificial altars. Beneath each altar were perpendicular lines of pipe drains for the blood of sacrificial animals. Inscribed on stone blocks were cuneiform figures of chained men sitting before a triangular sun. Behind the altar row was a third massive door of gold which swung silently open to the West to receive us. Here the courtyard was wet clay. At one end were piles of neatly chiselled stone blocks.

"You'll see more of the Yard of Labor," the Warden said, hurrying us towards the final door of black copper. The door, compass oriented to the North, was hardly wide enough to admit one man at a time. Beyond the door was a narrow path of living stones ending at the foot of a vertical shaft of unknown mineral which changed hues according to the intensity of light rays impinging on its surface.

"The Prison," Warden declared firmly. "The Second Level."

* * *

These then were some of the fragments that fell into place when time confined us within the faults and limitations of the four quarters of the earth. A positive identity was not possible in the beginning. North, South, East and West came together, for life in the Second Level was pleasant. Contrary to expectations of undreamed-of torture, there was nothing of the sort. The Warden exhibited a highly novel blend of goodness tempered with firmness. He had all the time and inclination to be a connoisseur of men—for what Warden destroys that which he is to take care of?

From the very first day that we entered the Second Level, we were treated with utmost consideration — except for the common chain which the Warden never removed. The chain knotted us together into a community. Life in the Prison was impossible without it. All the vital necessities like eating, drinking and sleeping, were linked to the chain. The door that led to the dining room and the Yard of Labor could only be opened and shut by the combined weight of our bodies exerted in a perpendicular line of force. To receive food, we first had to lift the stone blocks from one end of the Yard of Labor, depositing them at the opposite end over slippery clay. This required of us the formation of an equidistant circle of upraised arms using the chain as a guide. To drink water from the twelve faucets that lined the wall of our room, we all had to press a lever at the same time with the same amount of force or nothing would come out.

Admittedly, the chain was a marvellous piece of engineering. It neither chafed nor irritated the skin as it ran over the head and right arm, resting on the left shoulder and passing across the chest and back to the right hip. The chain also had the ability to simulate the temperature of our bodies. It never made its presence felt until one fell out of unison from the others. The chain had to be accepted as inevitable, even necessary.

During the early days of captivity, small details bothered me. I was certain that a great physical discrepancy existed

between the members of our group. A wild growth of hair grew on Number Two. Number Three had eyes so brightly brown as to seem unreal. Knotted veins crawled on Number Four's right leg. A long running scar streaked across Number Five's left arm. Flap-like ears hung on Number Six. Number Seven had an avaricious hook to his nose. The sensual wound of a mouth slashed Number Eight's face. The chin of Number Nine pressed closely to his neck. The fat, stubby toes of Number Ten were obscene. A springing cage of ribs outlined sharp ridges on Number Eleven's chest. Number Twelve was moon-white in pallor.

The chain would not allow me more than half a glimpse of the men behind. After several weeks I began to doubt my first impressions of the men behind me. I felt that I had committed errors in placing the right identifying marks on particular individuals.

Now it was Number Two who seemed to have unusual brown eyes. Number Three was sprouting a wild growth of hair. Down Number Four's left arm was a jagged scar. Number Five was pale. Number six had a receding chin. Number Seven's mouth drooped open with fleshy lips. Number Eight had fat stubby toes. Number Nine had knotted veins on his right leg. Number Ten had shrunk into a loose frame of skin and bones. Number Eleven had flap-ears. Number Twelve's nose was now a hawk's beak.

It was in the Yard of Labor that the meaning of these changes finally took shape. The Warden had sprinkled the gray consistency of the clay with water and had slicked over its surface with a metal roller. Smooth as glass and very slippery was the Yard when we shuffled out for our daily bread. The day's work awaited us at the opposite end: a neat, square block of stone. Treading lightly, we approached the center. I saw all twelve of us reflected from the glassine polish which caught the impenetrable blue of the sky above, the shapes, even the texture of bodies. We had all grown equal in face and body. No doubt my companions saw the same similarities. When we reached the day's burden of rock our bodies responded as one. We swung the block of granite up high,

feeling the massive shape to be what it really was—a mere pebble; a plaything to toss about like a ball.

I can hardly describe the great comfort which this uniformity instilled in our hearts and souls. Suffice it to say that before this experience of commonality, nothing else mattered. More accurately still, nothing else seemed to have truly existed. And I thought then that the lesson was ended. What a fool I was to have assumed consummation so readily. At that very instant the chain fell, blooming relentlessly on the ground like some monstrous star, satiated by the sap it had sucked from some spectral glade of trees. The familiar pattern of Faith was quite shaken from its formal dogma. We stood separate again from each other in the Yard of Labor as pebbles in a quiet pool. The Enemy saw this opportunity and picked us up, one by one, in the grip of the Warden, freeing us from our own pre-conceived thrall to brotherhood.

Now it was with the deep sense of children who fancy the worst at some passing shadow against the wall, but cannot possibly know the very worst as they are still unable to imagine Life, that we took our faltering steps away from each other to enter the compelling reality of the Prison's Third Level.

"It is Time," the Warden said, beckoning us toward the very nature of things.

* * *

How can I reveal the barest glimmer of this world when you are unaware of being in the very middle of it?

What was it that I had expected to be done to me on the day that the Warden finally brought me to the Interrogation Room? The water cure? Electric shocks? Truth serum? Poisons?

These are mere humiliations of the body. They are trifling procedures which make prisoners more loath to confess. They constitute a posturing exhibition of inadequacy that never strikes one with the blinding force of revelation. Indeed, such methods of persuasion are typically human and as such

never completely succeed in removing dross from the metal because they are, of themselves, extensions of human frailties.

Practiced in the art of change since HE is HIMSELF Unchanging, the Enemy has more subtle means of pursuing the devious silt between the finest mesh of filters imaginable. HE has the image of HIMSELF impressed on each man, making us assume a form that is forever seeking a state of dissolution and variation while completely dependent on the security of the Enemy's Immutable Law.

It is for you, therefore, who are Children of Time, to discover just how much your blindness has betrayed you.

* * *

The Interrogation Room at the Third Level is easy enough to find, the Enemy disclosed when I entered. It is found anywhere and everywhere. A great deal depends on the person being interrogated for it is the illusion of the human senses.

I found myself in the Room of Mirrors and saw my past and present recorded in a bewildering array of facets—similar to the shifting crystals of a kaleidoscope which form organic unities only to pulsate to another symmetry in ever constant impermanence.

I was walking through a jeweled garden of emeralds and jades, sprinkled with amethysts and rubies, while a diamond-sun vibrated in its zenith couch of tourmaline. The music tore each nerve ending in the body with prisms of notes. As a child I had known this music to be the haunting call of woodwinds between flashings of gossamer wings. Now the garden was made richer by an incalculable dimension when mirrors came alive into flowers. Only for a moment did the brilliant hues hold still. They shrank slowly, horribly into a pendant earring that was dangling from the ear-lobe of an odalisque.

She ran her fingers through the air in a blur of needled points — enticing, seducing — while fully-turned garnet lips yawned open. A dark cesspool of slime quivered out of her mouth, oozing and staining the air while a hollow metallic buzzing rippled the inverted bowls, peaks and matrix of white flesh. Her nostrils dilated. A purple obtruded tongue with

syrupey drippings emerged from the cavernous mouth and crawled the graven distance between us with a greedy intent to coil around my neck.

Why not? Did I not know her in past conspiracies? palpitated with the body's desire to surrender in incandescent foulness? while at the same instant—deliriously shrinking away from the blot of diabolical excrescence?

Dread and desire merged inextricably, flaying and tearing in an icy depth of concentration. Only two facets gone from the myriad cell of mirrors. Now a sanguinary cloud blossoms a new mortal passion. Still another. A single tune played backward and forward. Intervals of light and darkness. Variations on the brittle screen of ascending and descending steps toward the widening horizon. The last facet is reached. The mind, swiftly, surely rends the final tenuous silhouette and the Blessed Enemy and I are in Oneness.