

La Sapienza

Alexis Levitin*

Joseph had no illusions, or so he thought. He knew he was getting old. But when he looked at the past, he felt no bitter taste of regret. His only regret, he mused, was that the past was indeed the past. It would not come again. But at least his silo was filled with the gathered grain of memories. That was his harvest.

Though he avoided looking into those evasive eyes in the mirror, he managed to shave quite successfully every day, his attention focused narrowly on the particulars at play. He could handle the neat cut below the sideburns, the smooth sweep along the jaw and down the cheeks on either side. The area above the upper lip, where if he were more daring a moustache might have flourished, remained the greatest challenge. But somehow, he dealt with it all. Even the irritation he still felt after more than sixty years, peering at the less illuminated left side of his face. He wondered if all men shared his problem, suffering a similar asymmetry, leaving one side of their face half in shadow, no matter how fine the lighting above the bathroom sink. Maybe we are all like Picassos, he managed to chuckle. In any case, keeping his sagging face as presentable as possible, he managed somehow to deftly avoid an encounter with that other who haunted any mirror before him. Of course, full-length mirrors on the inside of bathroom doors in better hotels were an even greater threat to his equanimity. He loved zoos and he especially loved the noble silverback gorillas that would stare back at him from beneath their deeply furrowed brows, but he was not happy at all when an inadvertent glance as he shambled, wrapped in a large white towel, from his bathroom at the Hilton would reveal to him, momentarily, his deep kinship to that well-muscled and contemplative cousin. It was, of course, the belly, not the muscles, that they shared.

Yes, aging was a bitter-sweet experience. Remembering was, of course, a greater pleasure than ever and, except for proper nouns here and there, his memories came readily, well-textured with the past. However, the present was a problem. Retired from the classroom, he had come to Porto to work on what would probably be his last research project, an examination of the sources for a little known late medieval Portuguese romance. But the lithe bodies of youthful women adorned with tattoos and nose rings filling the bars and overflowing into the cobbled streets of the old European city brought forth in him a mixture of ancient excitement and sobering despair. He knew what his role in life had become and he knew it was inevitable. Yes, he could putter away at his research, but his real role now had defined itself in precise, stark terms, as if beneath an implacable noonday sun. He was just the observer.

For half a century, he had been going for refreshing short vacations to Sagres, the southwestern tip of Europe. He loved the fresh wind, the orange cliffs, the cicadas screeching in the heat of day, the translucence of the icy Atlantic rolling ever new towards the sandy beaches tucked beneath towering

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faces of naked rock. It was his favorite place, he thought, in the world. Yet something strange had happened there, something both natural and as inexplicable as a nightmare. For over fifty years the bodies growing tanned on the beaches remained young, vibrant, slender, unchanged, in fact, eternal. The only one in Sagres who had changed in all that time, or so it seemed to Joseph, was he himself. He continued to visit paradise, but he understood that he was no longer an inhabitant, but rather an outsider, a neutered observer, tolerated, but quite reasonably ignored. It reminded him of the flight of ducks and geese each fall and spring, making their eternal journey south, then north, always the same V-shaped formations, the same chorus of honking, like the sound of a distant kennel of dogs high in the air, year after year. The geese and ducks were eternal, or so it seemed. Only he, Joseph, was subject to change, invaded by time. Everything remained beautiful, the Canada geese and the mallards of New England, the young girls in their bikinis on the beaches of Sagres, and at the same time his own position, confronted by all that beauty, was a nightmare. Life was eternal. He was not.

This last essay, the study of the sources for what, in truth, was a rather unremarkable late medieval text, no longer held his interest. But abandoning it would be worse than slogging on. He realized he had become a kind of workaholic, despite retirement five years earlier. Work had become the barrier between himself and the void. He just wished his studies still carried the flavor of meaning they once seemed to have. But they no longer did. And yet he plodded on. What, after all, was the alternative? T.V.?

When he looked up from the computer screen, as was happening more and more these days, he could see in the evenings through the gauze of his curtains a blinking sign across the street: *La Sapienza*. The name wasn't even Portuguese, but he imagined the proprietors considered their new nightclub more sophisticated with the Italian name. It was very modern, very modish. He walked by it almost every day, but never had the courage to enter. It was a place for the young, he was certain, despite the irony of the name. No, he was sure he would never enter.

But as he sat gazing at the blinking sign through his gauzy white curtain, he began to grow uneasy. He suspected that it was not just the night club he would never enter. In fact, he understood more clearly than ever, that *La Sapienza*, wisdom, was beyond him. Though he had some lingering faith in his intelligence, he knew that wisdom itself would always remain beyond his grasp. And reluctant to admit it, he even knew why. In order to enter the door to wisdom he would have to acknowledge that the individual geese and ducks flying north and south in V-formation were not immortal, that the beautiful girls on the beaches of Sagres in fact grew older every year, that their thighs thickened and their breasts began to sag, that they finally stopped appearing on the white sands beneath the red cliffs, growing stiff in their limbs and stout in torso, safely at home before their television sets, that everything and everyone shared the same fate. Everyone. It was the way of the world. It was the nature of things. We were all in the same boat and the boat had an irreparable leak. He knew it, but could not accept it. The only eternity was in the past. His gaze returned to the monitor on his small desk. He would putter on, but he would never enter *La Sapienza*. That was a step he could never take. He knew it wasn't for him.