

The Cistern

Alexis Levitin

He had loved it all, but now he was dying. He had put his affairs in order, sent his files to the appropriate university archives, updated his will, made sure his children were taken care of, given a decent sum to Greenpeace, World Wildlife, The Wilderness Society, Nature Conservancy, and Doctors Without Borders. He had left his apartment spick and span, destroying the personal mail accumulated during half a century or more. He had consigned his four thousand books to four different bookstores, indifferent to the monetary results. His art collection would now be the burden of his son. He hoped it would also be his joy. His piano he had given to a talented and eager young jazz musician he had listened to now and then late at night in Greenwich Village. He had tried to leave things in order, as best he could.

And now Duvitas was in Portugal for a last visit. It was a modest country, and he had always been happy there. It lacked the exuberance of Brazil and the passion of Spain, but it was a trustworthy and reliable little place. In fact, he always felt rewarded whenever he came. Now that his research was over, now that his filing cabinets were empty, now that his publication record was simply a *fait accompli*, he found himself revisiting favorite corners of this ancient yet humble country, without a plan, without a clear-cut goal in mind. He was just there, in a rented car, to say good-bye.

The pain in his side was intermittent, and he was grateful for that. He hated to take the medication because it left him groggy, not really present, not really himself. He remembered Rilke's words to his doctor, who, pronouncing a cure impossible, had offered him palliatives: "No thank you, Doctor. I have faced my life head-on, now I will face my death head-on." He admired Rilke as he admired Schubert. Both of them delved deep. "Herr: es ist Zeit. Der Sommer war sehr gross."

He had driven slowly through the hills and mountains, stopping at modest inns and ivy-covered rural pensions for the night. He had gone out of his way to visit Sortelha-Velha, a village of some thirty-five inhabitants, with a ruined castle left stark against the countryside below. Gazing at the broken splendor of its silhouette, he imagined once again how pleased Lord Byron would have been, during his Portuguese sojourn, to mount those crumbling walls and stand amidst the romantic grandeur of this remote outpost of civilization. Creeping slowly through the narrow ancient gate, the first thing he saw, while still in his car, was an old man on a wooden stool refurbishing a leather saddle. It could have been five hundred years ago. No one else was in sight, but to his surprise he heard a murmur of voices from a small schoolhouse in one of the narrow cobblestoned streets. This, and a handful of T.V. antennas, discordant against the late afternoon sky, reassured him that, in fact, he was still in the here and now.

He found his way to the only rental apartment in the village, still unmarked, still unknown, available as always. Inside everything was silent and solid, as if he had entered Morandi's eternity. Everything was made of wood or pewter or patient ceramicware from another century. After lying down and perhaps drifting off for an hour or so, he arose and went to the only restaurant, where he was the only customer. The entranceway was filled with an enormous bellows, at least twice the size of a man. It was no longer used to bring embers to a red-hot glow, to help a farrier hammer out

horseshoes or a blacksmith shape a scythe. It was beyond its days of service, though by its presence, its quiet elegance, it was, perhaps, still serving the past. The owner, who was also his waiter, brought him some smoked ham and a chunk of heavy corn bread. He also brought him a half-bottle of simple Dão, apologizing for the limited offerings. There was no longer a cook, he explained, no longer much business at all. Duvitas waved off his apologies, totally content with the simplicity of his fare, totally content that Sortelha-Velha seemed to have fallen off the map of modern Portugal.

He ate slowly and drank slowly, enjoying the company of the shadows and the proximity of the ancient bellows just behind his back. An hour later he paid and took his leave. He walked slowly back to the immaculate small apartment waiting quietly for the only tourist, apparently, who still could find his way to this village from the past. After brushing his teeth with icy water from the tap, he stretched out in bed, grateful for everything. The dull ache had returned to his side but could not obliterate his happiness. He sighed deeply and managed to fall asleep.

The next day, he again went out of his way, if one could use such a phrase for someone on a meandering good-bye visit to a land he had always cherished. His immediate destination was the Poço do Inferno, a small pool of icy water deep in the forest, one of his blessed places in this quietly blessed country. As usual, there was no car parked at the head of the trail, nor was there anyone at the shady mountain pool at the end of the path strewn with pine needles and pinecones. He took off his shoes, stuffing his grey woolen socks inside. Then he removed his clothes and folded them neatly on the bank of the pool. The still water was icy as it always was, but he forced himself in, because he knew what delight came after the shock. At first he thought he couldn't bear it, then he felt, as he always had, that this plunge into primal purity stripped away the dross of ordinary day and left him utterly refreshed, utterly new-born. For him this was his final baptism, and he wondered again why this mountain spring had not been named Poço do Paraíso.

Continuing up into the mountains, he drove by naked slopes with patches of snow on their northern face. After a night in Seia, another detour led him to a nearby mountain kennel he remembered well. He was there to visit, for the last time, the noblest creature he had ever encountered, an Estrela Mountain Dog. The owner remembered him from a previous visit and greeted him warmly. Duvitas asked if old Sultano was still there. "Claro que sim," said the breeder. And he led him around back to where the dog was lying beneath a mountain pine. Sultano perked up his ears and came to greet the newcomer. He was friendly but dignified. Duvitas buried his hands, his face, in the thick, rich fur. This is the creature he would wish by his side in the beyond. Gazing at Sultano, inhaling the heavy odor of his health, feeling the comforting warmth of his heavy coat, his black mane, he understood why primitive thanes had often ordered that their loyal dog be placed in the long boat to accompany them on the last voyage. He basked in the presence of this kingly creature high above the world, high in the crisp air and bright sun of the ancient Serra da Estrela. The pain in his side was there, but Sultano's presence made it seem of no importance. "Obrigado," he said to the breeder, "muito obrigado, mesmo." And with a last caress of the heavy, wise old head, he took his leave.

Then, by circuitous roads, he had made his way from the high Serra da Estrela towards the frontier outpost of Marvão. There was something special about many of the frontier outposts, established over a thousand years ago to protect the small country from its larger and more ambitious neighbor to the east. Monsanto, further north, had even been a garrison town for the Roman conquerors. They must have found women companions amongst the local populace of Celts and Lusitanians, for he still remembered the tiny burial space carved into raw rock, high on the mountain, where the invaders had buried a child at least two thousand years ago. All that conquest, all that bustle, and always accompanied by death.

And now, at last, he had reached the ancient fortified castle town, Marvão. Gazing east from its well-maintained ramparts, he knew that Spain, another kingdom, was hidden in the haze of the torrid midday silence, pierced by the shrilling of cicadas clinging to the rough bark of olive trees. Spain, a

kingdom he would not be visiting again. He walked along the battlements and carefully descended a stone staircase. From the valley below came the crowing of a rooster and the spiritless barking of a dog. Then the silence of noon reasserted itself, accentuated by the buzz of the cicadas. Before him, a heavy wooden door led to the ancient cistern. He knew this would be his last visit to that quiet, disturbing, yet reassuring place. He leaned against the oak door and it swung open. Then it clicked shut behind him. Now he was bathed in utter silence, for the cicadas of the castle courtyard could no longer be heard.

The cistern looked like a solemn swimming pool from the Middle Ages. It was at least fifty meters long, beneath a low, arched vaulting of stone. The water was perfectly still, as if it had not stirred in a thousand years. One could feel by looking how icy cold it must be, must always have been. It was crystal clear, but unlike a modern chlorinated pool, it was not sparkling blue, but lay in somber sienna tones, as if it were an old-time photograph of itself. One could see to the bottom, but there was nothing to be seen. Just the water, the mystery of its presence, its pure transparency. For Duvitas, this was one of his great, good places on earth.

But then he looked up from the translucid water to the low stone ceiling. There, as still and as constant as the purity of water beneath, clustered a coating of millions of tiny black flies. He had forgotten about them. But there they were, not hovering, not humming, just sitting calmly in their legions, above a well of eternity's waters. At first, he was shocked, but then there was a change. He began to feel that this host of flies, appalling in its numbers, was just another manifestation of the indomitable, irrepressible life force, a force that permeated everything. After all, God had said, "Go forth and multiply." And he remembered, with a wry smile, Roethke's root cellar poem: "Nothing would give up life: / Even the dirt kept breathing a small breath."

How could he begrudge this multitude of flies their yearning for life, their urge to exist? In truth, we were all in this together. And he felt, now, at last, that there was nowhere else to go, nothing else to do. Here, on the edge of another kingdom, his only task was to say good-bye. And that was just what he was doing.