THE DUST AND THE DARKNESS

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Desisto,
e eis que na mão fraca o mundo cabe.

Clarice Lispector

[I quit,
and see, the feeble hand does hold the world]

PROLOGUE

I park my bus on the shoulder of the highway. The deserted locale looks good for me. I grapple with the bar that opens the door, which doesn't work well, and allow the incomplete figures to escape: a mob that trembles in the wind.

I get out too, feeling the chill of the morning. A disturbing voice asks me, "Is this the place?"

I nod. A thin figure asks me for a cigarette and a light. We both shield the flame from the wind, and now I can see that he has a face. He drags slowly on the cigarette, inventing a pocket where he hides his left hand. I sense that he's irritated.

Without looking at me: "What year is this?"

I think about it – and decide: "Nineteen seventy-one."

Two or three figures are already disappearing in the distance. An arm waves to me. In small groups, the entire band recedes into the empty, reddish plain. The further they go, the clearer they seem.

This is going to take a while, I imagine. But, even so, I leave the motor running – and I lie down on the bare ground, waiting.

ACT ONE

My character — or my friend, who at the moment is all I have, along with you there with your critical eye — my friend is finishing up the class. He reviews, repeats, insists, points to each of the topics listed on the blackboard, numbered from one to eight, four on the left, four on the right, and a mild affliction shows itself in his facial expression. He wants to leave no doubt there, and every nerve in his body shows it, his entire soul fastened upon his own words.

But look closely: there's a moat behind him — and on the other side of the moat are his forty students, dressed in blue, each of them quite probably thinking of other things, things not written on the board nor related to what they are hearing. The room is silent. The lesson is very close to ending, and it seems they are holding their breath in the agony of awaiting the bell: at some other place in the building (better: in the universe), there's an official moving at this exact moment to the button for the bell that will decree the end of a cycle of voice and chalk in every room. But don't be unfair: that's not why the girls are so quiet. They're silent because the teacher deserves it. Not so extraordinary, I know. He's a monotonous teacher who instructs them in boring things, wheeling about his desk like an ant attempting to escape from a drinking glass. But there is clearly affection in his gestures; it's possible (even probable) that he is aware that the time he expends there in that space accomplishes nothing, it's probable that he knows — of course he knows! — that his words have minimal importance. Meanwhile, though, he moves, he speaks, he repeats, he writes on the board, and the zig-zag of his concentrated gestures concentrates the gaze of the forty students, as if they were

admiring the work of an artisan — a watchmaker, a shoemaker, a radio or TV repair man — even though they don't understand anything of what they are seeing. In sum: he does what he does very well, and this always creates admiration. But there's another secret, perhaps the main reason for the respect he is paid, even though he's a man so... *lacking in spark*, let's say: it's that we *sense* that he is greatly superior to what he appears to be. At times, we are almost able to perceive a quite discreet smile underlying that mechanized ritual of the lesson, a grin that, an any moment, might let loose a guffaw of freedom — at which point we would be in the presence of the True Teacher, just as we thought!

Well, we don't see the grin; we just know about it. And there's another detail to bear in mind: the teacher is a slipshod fellow. Worse: he thinks of himself as ugly, and, as a defense, is wooden in his manner. Hence the moat: if he were to take one step in the direction of his rosy, attentive students, he would certainly plunge over the precipice. If, in a moment of distraction, he approaches too closely, his hand immediately moves in the opposite direction, blindly, tapping on the desk top, drawing himself back to the board. Well, the students also find the teacher unattractive — but in a constructive fashion they imagine alternatives and make secret plans for his improvement: perhaps the color of his shirts, maybe the style of his shoes, or how about a different kind of haircut...so many things could be done! They even discuss the color of his socks! It's a disinterested affection, perhaps even precociously maternal. There are those, of course — there always are such people — who cruelly mock the teacher. And there are those who love him, the platonic types who sit in the front row and never know the answers to his questions.

Well, the bell has sounded. There's no wild exodus: only a growing succession of tiny noises, letting him know that they've had enough for today: he understands, and says:

“You're dismissed.”

Then the rush. Without looking at anyone, the teacher gathers his papers and tablets and books, methodically erases the blackboard, walks down the hall, carefully avoiding the possibility of brushing against anyone, and enters the

teachers' room for the coffee ritual. Watch: he goes directly to the thermos bottle. He has taught at this school for eight years, but we have the feeling, observing him, that he arrived yesterday. You can see it: he doesn't feel at home; he doesn't speak; he attempts to go unnoticed, but he stammers; he's a weird man. I'm not going to speak of the other teachers, because there's a great temptation to caricature them in haste. You already know them: the pudgy, good-natured one who reads the sport pages, the blond who's a special teacher, the time-server who's been there for years, the recently-graduated Japanese architecture instructor, the director who organized the coffee and crackers for the lunch hour, and so on. The fact is that, whether they're friends or enemies, they all speak more or less the same language, and show up at the same parties. The only outsider, the only strange one there is my friend. Look: after all these years, he still shakes when he drinks his coffee, he still seeks the shadows, the corner, the rear, as he awaits the next bell. What do they say behind his back? He's apparently not even interested in knowing, as he looks at the wall, cup in hand, perhaps reliving his panic that someone might speak to him.

The morning's lessons ended, the teacher gets his things together and quickly descends the stairs, avoiding bodily contact, and, with a slight sense of relief, emerges into the sun and the brutal heat of March, actually more a steam that rises from the ground: it rained all last night, and the city is a sea of clay, red clay, gluey, invincible. Notice: the redness of the clay takes over all of the other colors of the city. In front of each house, we see boot scrapers that remind us of the streets of the Old West, with their hitching rails. It used to be worse: but, thanks to a campaign waged by the Lions and the Rotary, united for the first time, the main avenue was paved in asphalt, the only street in town. But the teacher is still two blocks away from that avenue, walking along the street's more difficult side, where there are not even any tiled walks. The good side of the street, as always, is used by the students, and he would not feel right in joining them, in being in the midst of the idiotic screaming of people in groups. With each step the teacher takes, more clay becomes glued to the soles of his shoes, and his balance is uncertain, as if he

were walking on tiny wooden legs. And there's a general lack of stones. The very rich have bought truckloads of stone for the facades of their homes, but even these have become discolored by the clay.

He finally reaches the avenue, wiping his feet on the asphalt, leaving lumps of clay there, and walks quickly to the newsstand, which this time hasn't closed for lunch. It's not exactly a newsstand, but rather an embarrassed little furniture shop that by chance also sells outdated newspapers and magazines — and there, as always, at the tiny counter was Crazy Mary, deformed and stuttering, smiling and stupid, waving at him, happy to see her friendly customer and to give him the S2o Paulo newspaper, reasonably current. She laughed, he paid, she went dizzily to the counter, took the change from her father, gave it to the teacher, accepted his affectionate mussing of her hair and returned to the counter to fall once again into her deep silence.

At this point, my friend will be hungry. He walks down the avenue, nodding to others here and there, and comes to the Snooker Bar, with its enormous television mounted on the wall, phantasmagorical images, always turned up well beyond normal, along with the noise of the pool balls and the respective exclamations, and, on the other side, the small Formica tables. He walks to the rear, to the last table, and sits with his back to the wall and his eyes in the newspaper, devouring pieces of old news, until the owner of the bar brings him the same meal as always: a steak, fried egg, rice, beans, french fries, two leaves of lettuce and three slices of tomato. The teacher is a thin man — in fact, *dry*, with a kind of stretched dryness, if you know what I mean — but he eats well. Well and quickly: he reads his paper as he eats, like someone who considers the act of eating to be a waste of valuable time. There are people like that. That's why he likes the Snooker Bar: the service is good (even though the steak is sometimes served cold), the place is familiar (the owner knows him; there's no prying, no tactical distrust, no ill will nor excessive good will; mainly, there are no questions), and it's practical (there's the owner at the register, recording another lunch, to be paid for at the end of the month). It would take the teacher a long time to develop that kind of ideal intimacy at some other

restaurant: so he stayed with this one, which, in fact, was his only social space, in so many words.

His meal eaten, my friend will smoke his first cigarette of the day. He never would smoke in the classroom (perhaps because he would be worried that, sure enough, he would mistake his cigarette for the chalk), and although he might dare to smoke in the teachers' room (he had already done so, three times, with disastrous results), he usually felt indisposed in the morning. Better: *profoundly* indisposed, and a drag on a cigarette would be awful. But right after lunch was always a good time. Watch: very few people are able to inhale cigarette smoke with such pleasure. There's even a touch of fury in that intake that wants to finish the cigarette in one drag; but the exhaling of the smoke — what a relief! How delicious! Look how he settles back, how he closes his eyes, how he dreams! When you smoke that way, it's not even a vice!

Briefly dizzy, he goes out into the street after a discreet wave to the owner (whose name over the years he has not yet gotten right, it's something like Durval or Nerval), feels the strength of the sun, practically seeing the steam rise from the clay, lowers his head and moves forward that way, quickly, obtusely, following straight lines, blindly, heading for home.