

Oded Wolkstein / Hosting

“Everyone carries a room about inside him. This fact can even be proved by means of the sense of hearing. If someone walks fast and one pricks up one’s ears and listens, say in the night, when everything round about is quiet, one hears, for instance, the rattling of a mirror not quite firmly fastened to the wall.”

(Franz Kafka, *The Blue Octavo Notebooks*, translated by Ernst Kaiser and Eithne Wilkins)

Everyone carries a room inside him? How about letting me in?

No, of course not. You’re not one to have guests around.

My eyes avail themselves of you, but you are never available. My gaze pleads with the man at the reception, only to be turned down “with no vacancies.” As in every night before, you shall not have me. I snatch the guest list out of the receptionist’s hand and take a look, horrified to find that my name occupies all the rooms. But you are not available, because nowhere are you free from me. You are not available because I have seen you.

The look we cast on others always precedes us. It rushes to their eyes but shrinks from the darkness hanging between them. Between the eyes of a loved one there is always a third eye, wide open but failing to see us. Our look throws itself at this darkness, carving in it the shape of our likeness. Our eyes roll about in all the rooms, to awake them lest they forget us. In the look of a loved one there is always the nerve of a traveler who sets far and about, to chisel his name on the farthest of rocks. You want to break away from me for a while, but I recur in all your forgettings. Everywhere you want to disappear I have already been. My footsteps lurk behind yours like the fresh ashes of a fire, and you shall know, despite yourself, that here too you have loved me.

The look we cast on others precedes us like lightning precedes thunder. First you see it, then you hear. Yet after our eyes have taken hold of others, after we have sharpened the keys to all the locks and slipped letters under every pillow, what more is left for the ear other than drag along, slow and lingering, asking to heed it and all its luggage a room for the night? The mouth of the loved one, sealed with our name, doesn’t speak a thing. We may try and rock the gates but our gaze has already oiled them with its stamp, so that not even the slightest squeak

can be heard. The room is jam-packed, leaving no room for sound, no room for room. He who looks at his lover to see his own likeness shall only wait in vain for the mirror to speak back. The face that returns our reflection, carved in stone, is stiff and shut. A man walks about around the temple he erected to his own name as the night, upon him, grows long. Our fears have roughened up the rustle of steps, of a squeak. In vain. There is no loneliness in the world such as this – and our ear wide open to a sign of life.

“Everyone carries a room about inside him. This fact can even be proved by means of the sense of hearing.” At any rate – not by means of the sense of seeing. There is no loneliness such as this, for he who carved his lover in his image isn’t even a passerby. There is no way for him to pass by. For a way – a manner – is the sum of time multiplied by speed. That is, hearing: “If someone walks fast and one pricks up one’s ears and listens, say in the night.” And what if it was you who walked about at night, in your room, not leisurely but fast? Walking between the walls of your room as though down a road? Someone walks about in his room at night as if he has someplace to go – going away from us, and soon to be gone out of sight. Who isn’t familiar with this anxiety: the enclosed peripheries, in awe of the gaze, suddenly heed to the authority of the gaze. The loved one has ceased to enumerate the syllables of our name with his measured steps. He walks fast, breaking our secret to the public without even leaving his room. In his hurry he dissipates the memory of us, rushing to a place where he could forget us.

And have us. Should this way be his, others could host us in its bend. *Hosted* is the bending of *hasted*, off on his way. Yet one should offer a way in exchange to the speed of the walker, one must dedicate time to him. I hear you walking fast, walking away from me. Or better yet – your hurried steps, stationed already across the threshold of my hearing, are scrambling to get in. Shall I consecrate a time for them in which to be heard? Shall I spread silence at your feet, the silence expanding in my room as you are walking, a silence to chase you and your speed like an ear? Shall I bequeath you the night across which you might walk away on me, at whose edge you could have me?

You walk fast, and I conceive of hearing you. My ear, hurting, is open wide to hear your steps, I hear in it the pounding of an accelerated pulse. The pulse doubles up your speed. I conceive of hearing you: night multiplied by speed. I hear to you a way; what? Did you say? I thought I’d heard something, or was it just “the rattling of a mirror not quite firmly fastened to the wall”?

The mirror, not quite firmly fastened to the wall, comes off to reveal a wall painted white. I knew that this was where you were going. All this labor: Even the floor I have covered with mirrors! Now they come off, dislodging themselves, and the white of the tiles that loom

underneath I no longer see. Yet I hear it in the whistle of the badly fastened mirrors, like a mice swarming in. Your speed is a guest in my night: After all, these are *my* tiles that you visit, to prolong in them this silence that surrounds us. A tile on top a brick and a brick on top a tile, this is the manner of poetry verses in the bible: a blank across every written verse. And across every mirror is a tile. The badly fastened mirrors – as one sees – leave these walls just as one hears. I disappear before you, before your face that became a universe, growing silent before your mouth that opens to a road. I am forgotten in the widening gaps of your lines – a guest in the ways of the world, which is the way of the land – of every living creature, hence a way leading unto death. Or so I hear, which means I'm hearing, a squeak.

The mirror comes off from the wall and a guest comes to stay for the night, the white night that trickles behind it. The night during which, sleepless, I never shut an eye, seeing nothing but darkness; the night during which, in the speed of your hurried steps, I erased my likeness from the wall; the night I hollowed space for your leaving. The night I heard my own name hosted on a tile on top a brick and a brick on top a tile, until I realized that you are talking to me now, that it is your door that squeaks. That the beginning of poetry is in the silence I laid at your speed – that I laid at my being forgetting from this world, taking my time with it. That music is borne of the squeak.

The squeak that signals that you are free from me. I hear in it the opening of your face. I can come in there, but there is no need to. You are already hosting my steps, disappearing, offering the echo of your own steps instead, crying over them in squeaks. Or perhaps it is me who walks off in haste, increasing my pace across your night, mourning your walking in whistles? “Is this really singing at all? – perhaps, indeed, all that she really manages to do is a sort of whistling? And everybody knows whistling inside and out, this is the core artistry of our folk or, rather, it's not even deserving of the name ‘art,’ rather it's simply how you would characterize us, this is what we do.” (Franz Kafka, *Josephine the Songstress or the Mouse Folk*, translated by Phillip Lundberg)