

PURE AGONY

WILLIAM SAROYAN

He could only laugh, even when the remembrance of her small elbow was a sadness to his hand, holding her to him as they moved across streets busy with traffic, and laugh, even when the presence of her small form beside him in the city was a strangeness there. And when it was coffee together, her eyes wild in his eyes, and her thin lips sad, and angry with talk, all he could do was laugh.

Why do you laugh? she asked. When I look at you I want to cry.

Even then, he laughed.

And her small feet, in the small worn shoes, hurrying with him through the streets, in the latest act of the endless sideshow; loudly, a sudden leap of purity of pain, musical, her sadness walking beside his sadness, and his anger, laughing. He felt the rush of melody in his blood, soundless but with form: swiftness of death in the living.

The going. The helplessness, walking.

At the restaurant she asked why he laughed. He wanted to tell her, but forgot what to say because of the

wildness of her eyes in his eyes, all the years of their being unknown to one another, all the years of waste making a pain in the lost emptiness of the past, himself there, and herself there.

The error, not to be corrected. They could not turn back and find themselves, and it was thus, and now: her face the only truth of the earth, his blood clamoring to reach the clamoring of her blood. He could tell her he loved her, but it was true, and the words were words he had thrown about carelessly. Now it would have to be wordless.

And going away from her, there was no going away from her, and the song of seeing her alive moved through his living, wakeful and not, like swiftness of wild beast running, or precision of machine pulsing with fire, numerically, yet with savage passion, increasing every day in intensity, every moment away from her being a moment of remembrance: the pain of her elbow in his hand, the sorrow of her small feet moving with his feet, the wildness of her eyes.

I saw you, she said at last, a year ago. In December. You were at the museum, looking at Persian miniatures. Do you remember?

A whole year wasted. Did he remember? He remembered seeing her ten years ago, a hundred.

Why didn't you speak to me? he said.

You looked at one picture a long time, she said. It was a soldier with a spear through his heart, smiling.

Why didn't you speak to me? he said. I remember the picture.

You were in shabby clothes, she

said. You were angry. I was afraid.

I had no money, he said. Why didn't you speak to me?

The day lengthened, all days became the day of their meeting, and all he could do was laugh about it. He went once to her house and met the man she had married, and saw the child she had borne, and when he had seen each of these who were now walls between him and her, he knew he would not see them again, and would not take her away, even though his flesh and spirit ached with this desire. The man was weary; the child was of the man, wailing for him his weariness. He could not dislike either, and the thought of ever taking away from them their life frightened him. He knew he would not do it, his agony increasing in the measures of the soundless song of her life beside his life and within it.

He shook hands with the man cheerfully, and smiled at the child. When he looked toward the girl, her back was turned; he went down the stairs two steps at a time, and in the street found himself walking swiftly.

The girl herself was ill. Still, she was of his life: the quiet grief mingling with laughter, the depthless understanding.

There were half hours and hours together, full of timelessness and bitter laughter. He was never happier in his life, and never more miserable.

Once, in the restaurant, he was silent many minutes, hearing the oratory of his blood, waiting patiently for it to end, knowing that it *would* end. In that time of silence he saw himself pushing over the table between himself and the girl, holding her to him in the first embrace of the living, letting their blood flow

together, carrying her away from the lie of time and error, smashing before his passion all that was right, and saying only that their love was right, though all life might end because of it. And during this silence, her eyes wild in his eyes, seeking his thought, he laughed again, and again she said, Why do you laugh?

One afternoon, at the restaurant, while he laughed, they cried together, although the sound of their grief was a sound of laughing. There were tears, and drying of eyes, and they knew they had wept. And they knew they had wept because they would not meet again.

The day of remembrance lengthened, the music of his anger slowly reaching sound, thirty days away from her, forty, an eternity away from her, life hollow, the endless past sick with the waste of years, numerically, the music and the years. Late one night, when he walked alone through the city with the remembrance of her small form beside him, he began to hum the song, knowing there had never been such music before, agony so pure, so clean, so intense. He did not know where to go, and thought once, insanely, of going to her house, even if only to see her again, the music humming, the wild beast trotting, the machine moving with caught precision and power.

He went to his room and began helplessly to weep the song, laughing, and the song began with seeing her a hundred years ago, and waiting an eternity for her, and finding her suddenly in the city, in the darkness of it, small and sad and ill, but with the germ of himself within her, and laughing the wild song, all he could do was weep and weep.