

Gresham Cash

That Man We All Pass

The cobbled streets of Barcelona were vacant, unfamiliar deserts. We glanced longingly out of our windows at this emptiness, trying to recall which danger withheld the smell and touch of the free world. At night, we ensured that our doors were locked even though we hadn't used them. In reality, confinement changed few of our rituals. Some things remained exactly the same: everyone was paralyzed by fear.

He had a beard like Jesus, were he a Nordic god—thick, strong, impenetrable. He seemed unrelatable, much like that god made man long ago. His feast was only what was given to him; the rest was held behind shuttered doors, unspoiled until the end, whenever this end was to be.

Not long ago, I passed him as he finished a beer on the sidewalk. He asked for money for another. I told him that I was sorry; but sorry for what? It seemed an appropriate answer at the time. Now, it seemed global—sorrow.

Nonetheless, that time, as many similar ones thereafter, I said that I was sorry and continued to walk. Where was I going? Wherever we go when we seek purpose. I weakly held the rights to my lodging. A few hundred euros a month and the room was "mine." Writing four stories a month provided my income, and the rain, the sun, the embarrassment of asking, was left to some other man, woman, person who slept on a hard bed of concrete.

Before all of this started, we felt certain. Not any sort of true reassurance, but at least a glimmering hope that we would make it to retirement. My neighbor above my apartment, Scott, taught rich children Chopin. At least he taught them *about* Chopin; most were unable to get past a few basic sonatinas by Clementi. His best student, a thirteen-year-old girl who yelled at him in Catalan when she didn't want him to understand her frustration, was mastering Bach's minuet in G minor. In a way, it became the dirge for our neighborhood, El Raval. Every day the same: those first sad notes falling down the keyboard promising resolve into B-flat major, but not guaranteeing it.

Beneath my apartment, a young Polish woman named Ana, who told me that she was a poet, wrote copy for a marketing firm. I asked her if she liked the poetry of Wisława Szymborska. She said, "Sorry?" I smiled and asked her what she was watching on Netflix. She gave me the names of a few shows. I forgot them immediately.

In the apartment across the hall, a young man named Jordi left the apartment early each morning for the cafe in which he pulled limitless shots of espresso for tourists. His frustration with having to practice English with Chinese and Russian tourists was punctuated every morning by the slam of the large door in the stairway, the rattling of keys, and the heavy lock, as in a prison cell, bolting it shut. I once asked him if there was a way to shut our large apartment doors more quietly; he said that there was not; the doors were old; the locks were cumbersome; my Spanish didn't tell him what I'd hoped to insinuate.

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Our days, our quotidian repetitions, seemed endless and certain. We'd all wake up when Jordi slammed his apartment door. Most of us would sleep another two hours and then we'd get up, drink silty black coffee, and try to make something of ourselves. And, at the time, *ad nauseum*. Now, I look back and think, what a thing to have regularity—something to do other than make the bed and stare at empty streets from a balconette.

That was before everything was shuttered and locked. Now, our street resembled a picture of a European city with approaching Nazis in the next town. We were all hidden away from what we couldn't see.

I'd been reading a lot of poetry. It was the kind of thing that you could cram in a bag and access on a bus for five minutes. It was a quiet friend on a park bench or beach who whispered to only you. It never shouted. And no one could guess what you were discussing. The newspaper screamed chaos. Novels reeked of escapism. The Bible spoke a language only some could understand. But poetry, this was the friend everyone needed—the excitable neurotic; handsome and misunderstood; tortured with no end in sight; clairvoyant without a religious cause.

On the metro, on the bus, and occasionally while walking, I read Rilke. He was devastating in a way that made one feel secure, tethered to others, fastened to the same planet as him. It wasn't poppy or temperamental—just undeniably German. I often wished that I studied that language while in university, but at the time, it felt cold and distant. I wanted warmth, romance, and drama. Spanish was an easy choice. The sheer number of countries that it opened was appealing enough. German, on the other hand, opened literature, operatic *lieder*, poetry, and philosophy—each as steely as the last. I'd been to Germany. It was beautiful; but I was certainly not the type of person they wanted wandering their city streets endlessly, searching for metaphor in the trees or tactile word play from their women.

Barcelona had all the right ingredients. It was anarchistic, intellectual, artistic, and international, despite the pride in its own distinct identity. A few friends were all that I needed to unlock this fascinating city. Gaudí was interesting, but after seeing one bulbous cartoon hotel, I was more interested in the graffiti, the skateboarders, the bookstores. In my neighborhood alone, I had found five *good* bookstores. There were countless others nearby. How could I ever go home to a place where generic, inhospitable big box stores or an even more insidious delivery service were the best retail options for buying books? Then, I imagined that I would not return. And now, it was certain that I *could not* return.

Weeks ago, I was walking to La Central, which ranked as my favorite neighborhood bookstore. I liked it because the selection was vast; the prices were right; and there was an inviting courtyard cafe encased in walls of crumbling paint and covered by palm trees. I'd pretended to read some poetry in Spanish. Much of the rich word play was lost on me. But I tried. Somehow, the German's poetry kept surfacing from its tomb and tempting me into shared despair. I picked through several books before I settled on a new edition of a Rilke collection. It featured the German original next to English translation. It was like seeing the code to a computer program. Without even understanding the language, you could deduce that what lay in front of you was severely organized. After buying the book and hav-

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ing a cortado in the cafe, I walked back through the crowded alleyways of El Raval to my apartment.

Naturally, I had to pass the man with the beard who was cemented to the spot in front of the cafe. Again, I told him that I was sorry. He responded in German: "*Damit sie nicht meinen ich hätte nicht, wohin ich mein Haupt tu.*" I, like you must remain for a moment, was struck, first by the fact that he spoke German, and second, that it seemed to be such a complete thought and not simply incoherent rambling. If only I could have understood his words, perhaps I would understand him.

I passed him every time I left that cafe. I could feel no judgment for the man who reaches into a pocket for his daily bread. Curiously, I noticed that he said the same thing each day that I passed. After hearing it some ten times, I was able to break down a few words. But alas, I needed the key to yet another language to *understand* the words that he spoke.

Months before, my neighbor who taught piano had a party. It was nothing special. There were only a few friends, mostly gay men, invited over to have some wine and tapas. Everyone at the party seemed to be well-educated and from somewhere else. There were also two women, both with springy curls, who claimed to be Catalan. They consented to speak Spanish with me. Eventually, our conversation turned heated as they lectured me about feminism. They told me about the upcoming Women's March. I was curious. It was clear that they didn't see me as a patriarchal threat—I was an undernourished writer living in a country that I knew little about. How much of a machismo conquistador could I be?

The party moved to the rooftop. I continued to talk to the two women, Camila and Leti. After a while, our discussion turned to the government. Leti said that they were tired of the *Spanish* government mandating things within Catalonia. This was a clear overstepping of authority. The components of the Spanish state were autonomous after all. Somewhere in the middle of this conversation, a handsome Swedish man joined us. It was clear that his Spanish was superior to mine, and I was left in the dust. I evacuated the conversation by pointing out my need for more wine. I asked if they wanted anything. They ignored me. I'm sure it was a matter of asking incorrectly. I stumbled down the stairs and opened the archaic door to Scott's apartment. Electronic music prodded the room from the sound system next to which a tall, handsome man stood thumbing through books on the shelf. I walked to the kitchen counter and grabbed a bottle of wine and began uncorking it.

When I popped the bottle, only then did the man notice me over the music. He turned towards me and said, "*Hola.*" We pittered through a brief conversation in Spanish across the room until it became very evident that neither of us were native speakers. I joined him at the bookshelf and asked in English what book had caught his attention. He showed me a collection of Octavio Paz essays. I'd confessed that I bought a collection of his poetry in Spanish but was quickly tired by my inability to *understand* it. I also told him that I'd been trying to pick up a little German by reading through Rilke. He laughed and said something very long and complicated in German. We laughed together and he said, "I see you that you don't understand German very well either. By the way, my name is Florian."

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We spoke about literature, sociology, and the migration of people throughout Europe because of recent political strife in the Middle East, Africa, and elsewhere. We questioned the stability of the EU. There were pros and cons, of course. But the EU had weathered many storms during its brief existence. It was a soothing compress following two world wars, a handful of dictators, and splashes of genocide. Nothing seemed bad enough to break up the union.

Eventually, our host came in and interrupted our conversation. He lured us back to the roof for the remainder of the night. After this, Florian and I stayed in touch. If I was interested in hearing the black-and-white German version of European politics, I would buy him a beer or coffee and we would talk for hours. And that was part of the beauty of Barcelona; there was no shortage of bars and cafes with patios, terraces, and rooftops where meetups were optimized and stimulated by public interaction. For months, we indulged in a wide array of these places.

Months after meeting Florian, I was back in the cafe reading Rilke. I enjoyed reading his shorter poems over and over. It was like having a friend who, with perfect articulation, could retell the same story, quote the same Shakespeare. But Rilke was unrelenting in his melancholy. For some reason, I kept coming for it. On that day, I was tortured by the last stanza of his poem "Pietà."

"You are tired," it said. And I thought this the most universal of sentiments. We were all tired. Tired of the repetition of labor. Jordi, slamming his door, early to the cafe. The Polish "writer," never writing because of the ease of money made in marketing. Scott, doomed to teach piano but never to compose. We were held by these things. They were our lock without a key. And in quiet complicity, Jesus allows the sinner, the woman, Mary the sister of Martha, to wash his feet. He lets her *remain* low. Sure, he forgave her. And if anything, he makes the point to his disciples to take *pity* on the lowly, the sinner. But we, like Mary, beg as in Rilke's poem: "O Jesus, Jesus, when was our hour? How we both wondrously perish."

I started to cry in the cafe. My friend, Rilke, had betrayed me. In public was no place to doubt my existence or its justness. Thankfully, Barcelona had no shortage of bars. I would leave the cafe, get drunk, and maybe text Camila, Leti, or Florian to see if they wanted to do anything that night.

Outside the cafe, the man with the impenetrable beard bent his head low and repeated: "*Damit sie nicht meinen ich hätte nicht, wohin ich mein Haupt tu.*" Rilke had filled my head with such absolutely German certitude that this must mean something; why else would he repeat it? So, upon leaving the cafe, I smiled to myself as I opened the recorder function on my phone. I was a writer, but I was not a journalist. Recording someone else's words made me nervous. But I had to know what he was saying.

With the recorder running in my pocket, I walked slowly past the man. He said the line. My slowed pace made him think that I was about to offer something. So, he looked up. He saw my notebook in my hand and said, "*Die Dichter schreiben um mehr.*" I was startled that he acknowledged me directly, and for the first time since I'd lived in Barcelona, I dropped six euros into his hands. He looked at me with some sort of deranged curiosity and said, "*Gracias.*" I felt so startled that I said, "*A ti.*"

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I fled the scene like I had done something wrong. The energy of having collected not one, but two, phrases spoken to me in German was exhilarating. I immediately called Florian. He didn't answer. I texted him that I was coming over.

After waiting at his door for two hours, he finally got home from work. We went upstairs and I played him the recording. He rubbed his angular chin for a few minutes as he wrote out the words. "It's poetry," he said. Naturally, this excited me. "No one would say this," Florian reassured me. I thought it a funny response to a recording of a man *saying* this. He continued, "I mean that no one would say this now. In *this* way. But basically, it means: 'So they will not think that I had not a place to lay my head.' No idea what it means." I grabbed the piece of paper and bolted for the door. Florian called out: "Do you want the second part?"

"*Die Dichter schreien um mehr* means 'The poets cry out for more.' That's actually quite beautiful," Florian concluded with an affirming nod. I thanked him and ran to the door again.

The man with the beard knew that I was a poet. He saw my notebook. But what was he telling me about himself?

I passed by the ceramicist's shop next to my apartment. The women inside waved to me. I waved back. I hurriedly unlocked the door and ran up the steps. I bumped into Jordi getting home from his shift. He said something about the weather getting nicer. I agreed and patted him on the shoulder. There was work I had to do, I told him. I turned around to unlock my door. We both jangled our keys and eventually unlocked our doors, slamming them with the same thunderous clap.

At my computer, I typed the words into a translator. The translation came out slightly different from Florian's. I entered them into Google. Rilke. He was quoting Rilke. The poem was entitled, "The Beggar's Song." I'd read it, but never in German. I grabbed my book of Rilke's poetry and went to my balconette to reread the poem.

Months have passed since I moved to Barcelona; weeks have passed since we've been reduced to glimpse the world from our windows. But the beggar's still there in the book of poetry, and it speaks to me more loudly in a time of silent chaos. In each one, an instruction. "So they won't think I hadn't a place to lay my head," Rilke wrote.

The man is out there right now. And unlike before, it's quiet. Everyone else is locked away in their apartments wondering when they'll ever get out. Occasionally, the notes from Scott's piano pitter-patter across the street, reverberating off the walls. Chopin sounds the same as always, only more like night, a raindrop, sadness. The wind blows the same, but softer now that we can hear it. On that same spot in the road, the bearded man's bedroll lay. Where else could he go? He didn't seem to have any more of a choice now than he did before mandated isolation. Only now, no one can deny that he is there, and all of our doors are double-locked, protecting us from whatever's beyond our cages.