

## THE MAN ON SAN YSIDRO

JONAS MEKAS

The man sat in the chair before the motel and looked across the street. Now he could see a man fixing a tire before a gas station, and there was a cat lying on the gravel, playing with two gray kittens. And a woman, in her colorful dress, hanging wet sheets on the line across the street.

He touched the gravel and he felt its coolness with his fingers. Yes, how cool, sharp, and hard, and real, he thought, how real.

The noise of the travel was still in his ears, and the brightness of the sun, and the image of Paulita, going toward the border—he still felt her kiss on his lips, it was cool by now, almost cold, and she turned away, he saw her going away, back to her husband, yes, to her husband, enough of this foolish thing, this affair;—he saw her going away, and then, suddenly, everything was quiet.

There were trees behind the motel, and an incessant singing of birds came in through the screen window, and all was like on a hot summer day, though he knew it was not, and, as he passed the street, he saw Christmas wreaths hung on the doors, and it was sunny and people walked in their summer shirts, and it was too strange and unreal, though he knew that it was only his nervousness, and that this town was the most real thing there was left now, he alone a dreamer, and obsessed one that came and will pass without leaving a trace on Camino Real, El Camino Real.

He thought he wanted suddenly to cry—to cry loud and alone, to reach it with his cry, the reality—but as he sat so, looking upon the road, the cars passing and the palm trees were like young open flowers, he thought—there were not even tears. He sat there, silent, alone. Why am I here, why am I here, he repeated, though, as he thought now, looking upon the road and the palm trees, there was really not much difference, to be here or to be there, he thought, when you're alone, if you're alone, there was no difference. And the whole insignificance, emptiness and banality of his last few years came suddenly to his mind, hurting like a sharp, cold nail. Five years, he thought with a foretaste of horror, five years!

Oh, oh, oh, he thought, what did I want to do with my life? Feet of clay, feet of clay. Was it life, was it life, those meetings, those faces, those doings? He saw the monotony of the eyes and faces, and words, and movements, now far back there, beyond those mountains there, and beyond many valleys, deserts, rivers and mountains. Really, when he tried to imagine it now, in the distance, he wondered how everything seemed so small, so insignificant, those people, and that work, and those ambitions—like little ants, dim ants, so far away now. He tried to imagine them, and they didn't grow, no, they didn't grow.

The woman was now talking to a child. It was a little, a little child. From a distance he couldn't tell if it was a boy or a girl. And the man across the street was still fixing the tire. And the birds sang.

Here I am, here I am, in a strange town, somewhere, that nobody ever thought about, at least not me, not me. And there was she, walking away, and across the border, back to her husband. What was it? Love? Friend-ship? And what is it, friendship, and what is love? I don't know, he thought. She is there, somewhere, now. I never saw him nor ever with the other man, neither do I want to see him. And here I am, sitting, brooding, re-membering. What a fool, what a fool to be.

Why do you do it, they asked him there, back there. Why do you do it, he asked himself. Why do you take her back, you, your-reU. on her whim, back there, where she came from. just because she feels so, because she not tired of you. Oh, the whims of women, when they have a choice . . .

What is friendship, and what is love? he thought. To do the foolish on a whim, may-he that's love. And as he looked again across the street, suddenly he thought maybe, after all. it wasn't so meaningless nor so foolish, everything, nor so useless—and who are they to ask why do you do this, why do you do that, and who am I? he thought.

Who knows why, why, why! And always why! There were times that he did everything because of whys. But not this time, not with Paulita. No, there were no whys, he just did it. No, he wasn't sorry at all, he wasn't sorry at all as he looked across the street, as he looked at the woman playing with the child, as he looked at the man fixing the tire. No. Maybe it was foolish, but as he looked back, trying to see those former years—how small everything seemed, how small, he thought.

Oh, how much he wanted, he remembers, so many times, so many times, back there, to break it apart, those long years of routine! not knowing how easy, really, it was to do it! Look, with a little foolishness only, everything, without effort, everything broke apart, like the river in spring, he thought, every piece crumbling and falling—the feet of clay!

These happy people, he thought. Yesterday he walked the streets. There was an old man sitting in a doorway, with a large sombrero, looking upon the streets, silently. When he went to the restaurant, this morning, he saw the same man again, sitting, as if he hadn't moved, looking upon the street with a strange quietness about him, — a quietness which reminded him of the earth. Same thing as earth, he thought. And, he thought, he himself felt, for a moment, that strange bond with the earth, something very concrete and essential.

But now he felt horror returning — the horror of wasted years.

How strange, thought the man, all these years I've worked and I thought I'm living and I'm doing something good and useful for people. I criticized the bad quality of the product in my office, I was sharp and practical and concrete in my criticisms and advices, I thought, was respected and appreciated and needed, I thought. Products. Objects. Everything else seemed unessential. There was Madison Avenue, Brooks Bros, suits, and a Christmas smile for everyone every day. Every day of the year was Christmas, he used to say.

Oh, what a fool, what a fool, thought the man.

Yes, there she was, somewhere, across the border. He himself, who loved her so much, had delivered her to him, safely. Yes, she was now far away, very far probably by now. The bitch, thought the man, and he felt all years of his life crumbling under, under a week, a single week of mad, foolish love. — A stranger, foreign, strange woman, just passing by oh, what a fool they said, what a fool, and besides, she is married, and is going back, back home, and who are you, and think about your work, and your career, think, think.—

Yes, he remembered everything clearly now, so clearly, their last time together, as they were sitting at the Oscar's.

"How quiet it is," she said.

It was very quiet.

They sat looking at each other. He could not eat. It was so quiet. The sun shone through the windows.

It seemed for a moment to him as if the whole world was quiet, as if waiting, in expectation, as if it knew that this was a farewell. He looked at the flowers on the wooden stands, at the windows, at the colored wall paper, red and green. In back of them sat a pair of young lovers, who laughed in little bursts.

It was then that he felt it for the first time, the strange feeling of loneliness, bare loneliness though she was still there, with the sun on her face. He didn't know why: was it the laugh of the two lovers, or was it the quiet brightness of the sun, or the flowers?—but there it was, that feeling, suddenly, a feeling that he hadn't felt for so long,

—He stood up and stretched. The midday sun was beating on the street, and he opened the collar of his shirt some more. It's time to go, he said, it's time to go.

He looked across the street. The man was still fixing the tire, though the woman with the child had gone into the house. The cat on the gravel stretched out, letting the kittens close to her ripe breasts.

As he passed the corner, he saw the same Mexican sitting on the wooden bench by the door, under his large sombrero, his face like the earth. He has never felt it, the loneliness, he thought. Yet he knew he had. A mystery, closed and unreadable, he thought. How strange.

From a juke box in a bar he could hear a song. The voices were high and beautiful. It was strange to him to hear the singing and to see the Christmas tree in the bright San Diego sun.

Now the last house was behind his back, and the hot bright asphalt road stretched toward the mountains, El Camino Real. So he kept going, though he didn't know yet where. But that didn't matter. "It doesn't matter," thought the man.

