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STEPS AND STAIRS*

ANTANAS ŠKĖMA

Editorial Introduction: Antanas Škėma (1911-1961), actor and writer, was one of the major writers of the Lithuanian emigration. His works include short stories, plays, and novels. For detailed analyses of Škėma and his work, see Andrius Sietynas, "Antanas Škėma," *Lituanus* 4 (June 1958): 58, and Rimvydas Šilbajoris, "The Tragedy of Creative Consciousness: Literary Heritage of Antanas Škėma," *Lituanus* 12 (December 1966): 5-25; reprinted in Šilbajoris *Perfection of Exile, 14 Contemporary Lithuanian Writers* (Norman: Oklahoma University Press, 1970), pp. 94-112, under the title: "Antanas Škėma—The Tragedy of Creative Consciousness."

Our apartment house does not have a full-time janitor, so the garbage no longer fits into the cans. Wax paper, egg shells, a cracked cup, milk cartons He on the side walk. Across the street—a boy's school. During recess four boys run to the area between two doors and play cards. Coins flash on the linoleum. The kids swear like old troopers sitting on bar stools in taverns. A carriage with an infant rests in the sun. He is dozing, the milk bottle and its slimy nipple slip out of his toothless mouth. His mother, a corpulent Ukrainian, is talking with a neighbor on the other side of the street. About money earned, about money saved, about money which floats above New York in thousands but settles as single dollar bills on Driggs Avenue.

I climb to the fourth floor. My steps splatter sound which sticks to the dusty walls. My steps rumple the high notes of an Italian song (a radio is playing on the second floor). Piles of accurately carved out steps accumulate on the stairs. I climb to the fourth floor, to the fourth, to the fourth, to the fourth. My steps are a mechanical saw slicing off the ends of planks. I climb among invisible plank ends flying in an enclosed space, surrounded by greenness I ascend toward the sun. On the top floor, not unlike an artist's atelier, a skylight in the roof, the sun's rays drill their yellow screws toward which the blind man thrusts out the viscous whites of his eyes.

Our neighbor is the corpulent Ukrainian and her large family. Husband, son, the son's wife, the son's son (the infant in the carriage), a sister, and the half-blind old man who now stands, head bent back, grasping the handrail, who thrusts out his eyes toward the sun's yellow screws. He grasps the rails as a ship's captain the spokes of the wheel when a thick fog is all around and murky white icebergs are ahead. He stands like this for whole hours, straight and immovable, an old and experienced wolf in this ocean of shimmering light.

Evening comes. The constant boring kindles the yellow screws, they redden, and the glowing light exhales a remembrance of a fire-site; and when the mechanic stops the saw, the screws revolve no longer, but cool and disappear in the approaching night. Below the ceiling a little electric lamp lights up. Covered with spider webs, the remnants of last year's flies, the lamp announces that you have changed course, experienced captain. You thought you sailed west, west the whole day. But your boat turned around, and you return to land again. An old fisherman, a friend of your youth, sits on the rocky shore. His campfire smolders. Dead fish lie around him. In the silk sphere fish and stars, sparks and embers, veined hands and mermaid scales. In the silk sphere a round night is reflected in the electric lamp.

I think all of this when I stop two yards below the old man and see the holes in his soles, while the half-blind man feels something completely other.

He cleaned banks. In Manhattan and Brooklyn, Queens and the Bronx. In the cellar were ladders and rags, cleaning oil and soap powders, and in the marbled rooms dust stuck to furniture, walls, ceilings, lampshades, and curtains—the unctuous dust of banks, like a thick layer of frozen fat. The Ukrainian stooped often, crawled on all fours, and swayed below the ceiling; hot water flowed through his unfeeling fingers; tables and chairs, telephones and ashtrays, the steel of safes and the blue veins of marble rejuvenated themselves with damp leather, redwood mirrors, the matted shine of plastic; his hands stuck together from the cleaning oil, they smelled of pine sap, of bare feet in the morning mist, the filth of old age, and wrung-out underwear.

I.R.T., B.M.T., Independent. Every night the subways, ruled by magic hieroglyphics, carpets from "A Thousand and One Nights," flew the Ukrainian to a different part of the city. He still walked a few blocks. The same taverns with different names licked his eyes. Gondola, New Orleans, On the 7th Corner. Store windows were jammed with shirts and shoes tied with red ribbons, presents for a girl friend, children, and for oneself. Advertisements for soap, candy, suits, and savings accounts would light up atop skyscrapers. Among the skyscrapers swayed an amorphous mist, like a fisherman's net from the shores of the Mius. Like the tiny epicurean dogs of spinsters, the goldfish in the aquariums of restaurants and movie theaters swam proudly and lazily through the green paths of the glassy water, inviting the hungry and the dumb into the heaven of mechanized food and visions.

The several dozen steps to the bank would return the Ukrainian into a blue past, into clear air which, like a splattered mirror, glowed in a frame of acacias swooning from thirst, into the death throes of great fish with rolled eyes, into breaking reeds, into the death struggle of mighty and white tails in the mud of the riverbank. Into the single ecstasy of his youth, an early morning when taut muscles, wet clothes, and the breathing of a distant God intertwined with life's syncopated rhythm, and the gigantic explosion of flying forms and very real happiness. Several dozen steps to the future, a million steps to a lost past. The Ukrainian was born on the shores of the fertile Mius River. Eighty *versts* from Taganrog, the port on the Azov Sea.

One night he was washing lampshades on 105th Street. Seven shades, like seven upturned Chinese hats, swayed below his dirty hands. He stood on an extension ladder. One leg leaned against a stair step, the other against accounting books. He had borrowed the books from a bookshelf, for the seventh shade hung above the steps leading to the room with the safe. This shade was particularly dusty, and the Ukrainian was cleaning the top of it with a damp rag. The boundaries between the dirt and the enamel arranged themselves like scythe-paths in a wheat field. It was a clever deception. The light from the neighboring lamp covered the last hat with a golden hue, and the little round world shrunk like in a Medieval etching. The Ukrainian stuck out his head, like that monk who found the horizon and surveyed the turning of the spokes and wheels of the universe. However, he only saw a field of wheat. The reapers were gliding like pale ravens in the golden air, the blades of the scythes cut into his hands, water poured into his bleeding blisters, he stood above the wheat field. His feet had taken root in the ladder, in the emptiness surrounding the earth. The thickest accounting book was slowly sliding. Like one of the caryatids supporting the world, the book slid for the Ukrainian brushed its spine with a wet rag.

Lamps still hang when one of the twisted wires burns out. And all the lights go out for the shattered world. Reflections and shadows fall on the craters and the rifles of the moon, the sun licks the sphinx's broken nose, fused metals link up in the black meteor from Mecca.

The Ukrainian lay on the bank's marble steps. He banged the back of his head, and sight was disconnected in the convolutions of his brain. As in paper cutouts, the white reapers were etched into the golden air, and the wheat field was now eternal like Van Gogh's final painting.

The first death is only a return. The rolled-eye fish splashed in the mud of the Mius' riverbank, and the old fisherman, the Ukrainian's childhood friend, stood in a boat, his blackened pipe glowing between his teeth. The transparent air, like a splattered mirror, framed itself in the viscous whites of his eyes.

The top floor—dusty and stifling. No one opens the window to the roof. The wrung-out underwear is just in front of the half-blind man's nose. He stands grasping the handrail. He hears footsteps. The sun's yellow screws drill into his eyes, the little spider-web encrusted electric lamp hurls muddy arrows.

An old and tired devil rides the telephone receiver. He is looking for his witch, a wondrous witch with a toothless mouth, a withered tail and a worn-down broomstick end. My steps are the footsteps of this envisioned witch walking above the churches of the Ukraine.

Young mermaids are splashing about in the bank director's ashtray. They play with the golden fish, the fish that swam in from the theater and restaurant aquariums. One of them, the most golden and the most ferocious, bites off the scaled tail of the youngest mermaid, and the mermaid weeps because it is no longer a mermaid. My daughter runs up the stairs to the top, stamps around, and the dying mermaid splashes around in the bloody water.

Water lilies droop in the Mius. Someone has soiled their blossoms with greasy dust. The experienced captain stands stern in his ship. He has no ladder, no extension ladder. The lilies are long and slender. Their heads reach the ceiling of the bank. The accounting book slid away; it cannot be found. The whirlpools in the Mius have seized the ladder. The lips of the half-blind old man curl up. He mumbles and is angry, even though his hands calmly grasp the handrail. His daughter, the corpulent Ukrainian is saying that he's going mad. Perhaps he is awaiting the second death.

Sometime all the live suns will be extinguished and all the burnt-out little lamps will light up. All real objects and all cherished hopes will unite in the black sphere. The second night will come—the last words of an infant falling asleep, the first kiss of sixteen-year olds, a Bach fugue, a sculpture by Maillolo, the ecstasy of Christ, the Buddha's serenity.

I unlock my apartment door and go inside. I left my footsteps on the stairs. They stuck to the dusty walls, they crumpled the high notes of an Italian song, they lay arranged in an orderly closet.

A wooden wall now separates me from the half-blind man. I try to smile. I work. I clean banks.

Translated by K. G.

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