

4 WALLS ^{and} A DYING FLAME*

I AM IN A large, dusky room. The walls are high, oh so high. Actually they are not walls, but huge bookshelves, bowed under Thoreau, Sartre, Buddha, Jesus, Paine. Between the books are paintings. Michelangelo's "The Creation of Adam" is there, and Durer's "Knight, Death and Devil," and "Saul and David" by Rembrandt. All are masterpieces, showing mankind during his critical moments. The floor is made out of marble, white, cold marble. I am standing there with my bare feet. All around there are statues, and on the statues quotes are engraved. Plato, Socrates, Rousseau, "The Thinker," all are there. But there is no door nor window, and I have only one little candle with a pale, under-nourished flame.

I hear footsteps, slowly moving footsteps outside of the walls. I scream. I hear footsteps, but the footsteps do not hear me. I am locked up in this world of human wisdom and culture.

I walk up to the bookshelves. They are totally covered with dust and cobwebs. I look at the statues. The pedestals are glued together. I run to the paintings. They are in beautiful frames. Those beautiful frames, I see only the frames.

How long have I been here? Has it been an hour, a day, a year, ten years? I take the candle up. The light flickers. It dies. No, not yet, it hesitates, and throws its poor light again a few feet away. I walk to the other side of the room. In the corner I discover a cradle. With interest I behold my newfound object. I notice a copper plate on it. With my sleeve I rub the dirt off. A name appears, my name. Not understanding I frown. I go to the other side of the room. I find papers with crying headlines: "Again progress in war;" "Conscientious objectors sentenced to death;" "Apartheid is dead. Long live apartheid." I step over them, and shrug my shoulders. Now I am in the corner on the other side. Here I find a large object, made out of light coloured wood. I see that it is new and unused. I walk around it, and recognize the shape. It is a coffin. Shocked I shrink back. I run away. I want to forget what I saw. I want to get out, away from this coffin, away from those worthless books, away from those frames, away, away. I run against the walls; tear the paintings down; use the statues as battering-rams. I take my favourite statue, "The Thinker." I had loved it always, because it was so full of culture. He was a passive person,

* Freshman Writing.



thinking about the problems of the world. Also now he was passive. I run to the bookshelves, take the books out one by one, skim through them. I point with my fingers at the underlined sentences. Rousseau tells me: "parliament comes from *parler et mentir*." I pick up the shaggy *Age of Reason*: the pages fall out. I fight against my tears when a piece of paper falls on the floor: "Christ is dead." I cry, pure pearls roll over my cheeks when I read the desecrated Ten Commandments.

Memories come back. I see the glass walls again which surrounded me my whole life, those pretty rose-coloured windows. I was so close, and yet so far from the world outside, so safe from its cruel dangers. But I wanted not only to be protected, I did not want to see the outside either. I started piling books up against the walls, books, and statues, and paintings. I tried to allay my hunger for culture and knowledge, and I kicked wisdom. When I realize this, I hear a little bell tinkle. Its silver tone goes over in trumpet flourish. The walls fall down. The flame of my candle becomes big and strong. It dances through the room. The flame jumps over to my body, and we become one bright, yellow, and red tongue.

by Ilja Scholten

Your voice counting eggs
And a breeze bending the wheat
Under a still sky.

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