Exiled

A faceless man looks through a window, opaque for the cold. Between the icicles he sees nothing but snow and white and more ice. Nothing interesting to see. He spots a bird, a black crow, a sign that something else is alive there besides him. He gets closer to the glass, touches the window with his hand and, as the raw cold wraps his fingers, he remembers he's alone. There are no birds, no rabbits, no foxes. Only him.

He pulls back his arm, goes back to the desk. Resumes writing on an old newspaper. Pauses again, checks how many rice cakes, water and newspaper he has left. Fewer than last time but they somehow never end. They should, he keeps consuming them and never gets more, but not even the laws of mathematics seem to apply here.

He looks around the room. There are no paintings, no portraits, just an empty frame on an empty shelf: memories, they don't belong here. Everything, from floor to ceiling, seems to be made of the same old creaky dark wood, of the kind that would make you wonder what the original room looked like since every plank seems to have been replaced multiple times. Near the spartan desk lies a clock, useless since the cold has frozen its hands. In the corner, there is a stove, not powerful as he'd wish but still better than nothing.

Yet it's not the stove what kept him from the cold: it's the newspapers. He sleeps on them, he writes on them and, when he's done writing, he puts them inside his coat to keep himself warmer. The paper isolates the skin, but it's the ink that warms his soul, it gives him back some humanity.

He lets out a sigh and resumes writing. He doesn't read what he wrote before, not because he remembers, but because it doesn't matter. He's not creating stories, he settles for concatenating sentences. He writes of a great monument for a gone king, an old lady and her cart of pottery, a British gentleman, two friends, a girl and her mother in a house with a triangular roof.

A sudden hand cramp interrupts his stream of madness, forcing him to drop the quill. Before picking it up again, he takes time to examine a golden coin lying on the desk. On one side there is the face of a man, someone important but now long gone. On the other side a label that reads “AN XII DU REPUBLIQUE FRANCAISE”. He tosses the coin and it lands on heads. He picks it up and tosses it once more: heads again. He tries a few more times and heads always reigns. He throws it away, doesn’t look how it lands. He doesn’t need to, he knows it’s heads. After all, laws of mathematics do not apply here. He could do this all day long and that coin would still never land on tails. That face seems to be there to haunt him. Which is why he has to do something else.

He resumes writing. Space runs short on the margins so he writes between the lines and then he tries in the spaces between words and sometimes on the words themselves. He decides he’s done, packs the scribble and puts it inside is coat, near his heart.

He goes to the window, checking if there is something new, anything different from the usual whiteness. He’d give anything for that but he has nothing. It’s alright tough, he was interested in something else: a small red letterbox covered with a thick coat of snow. Sometimes he finds more newspapers in it, although he never understood who or what puts them there. Maybe he’s just imagining this whole thing but at this point he doesn’t care anymore. Anyway he decides it’s time to attempt his daily madness. Those fifty yards between door and letterbox and back had proven to be challenging time and time again. Despite the wild wind has never been kind to him, he keeps doing this foolish ritual. It gives him a hold of himself, prevents him from fading away. Hence he’d better get going.

He pulls the heavy door and as soon as he puts a foot outside the winds wrap him and snatch him out of his liar. Step by step he walks toward his goal, he goes zip-zag to resist the ever-changing gale whipping his face. When he finally reaches the letterbox, he hugs it tight to find peace for the three seconds it takes him to grab whatever is inside it. He gives it a glance: it’s just another newspaper. He puts it in his pocket with a smirk of both satisfaction and disappointment, then

begins his journey back. The wind pushes him towards a different route so he doesn't notice the slab of ice awaiting him. He falls and never fully gets up, instead he drags himself forwards, crawling all the way to the door.

He's back inside again. He lays on the floor and closes his eyes, tries to forget the ordeal. When he feels he has gained some energy back he takes a better look at the newspaper. "Goman, l'insurrection de la Grande-Anse est terminée". Goman, that name isn't new to him, no doubt their paths had crossed before but the question is when? He finds stories from where he used to live, wars and peaces, rebellions and revolutions from all over the world but nothing about this place. It's because nothing ever happens in this place.

He turns the page, eager to know what he's going to be scribbling upon. A particular sentence catches his eye: "Au nom du genéral Bonaparte, le corps législatif est dissous; que le bon citoyens se ritirent". He wonders how they are still talking about that. Maybe not even time can erase what that man did. It strikes him, awakening forgotten memories of a sunny day of Brumaire.

He remembers walking through a triumphal arch reading with capital golden letter "LUDOVICO MAGNO", to Luis the Great. And yet the crowds seemed to forget this Luis as soon as they heard his name. He remembers an old lady carefully pushing forward a cart of pottery and immediately forgetting her duties as soon as she saw him. He remembers an old, tall, thin British gentleman timidly glancing at him from the other side of the street. He remembers two tired masons, friends for a lifetime, stopping to tip their hats. He remembers this young girl with her mother coming out of a window under the triangular roof just to see him. At the time he found it funny that, when people noticed him, time seemed to stop for them. To some extent, it gives some perspective to his punishment.

The newspaper falls from his hands. He wishes he had time to lay there and give in to the nostalgia but he knows he doesn't. There is something he needs to do and he needs to do it quickly. He needs to grab the quill and pin down this memory before it flies away again.

A sudden burst of life captures his body, he gets up and goes to his desk. In the midst of his sprint he stumbles on the coin he previously dropped, heads upward as expected. The severe look of that man fills him with determination, so he carries the coin with him to his desk. He dips the quill in the ink, takes a deep breath and starts writing on the top corner of the newspaper.

An old lady, a British man, two masons, a young girl and her mother. A great arch, a large street and a house with a triangular roof. He writes it twice, he mustn't forget. He writes it a third time, just to be sure. Then he gently lays the quill, breathes out and goes to the window. He then looks at the landscape, for once with wonder and he asks himself if maybe that was the same wonder that girl had in her eyes when she saw him from the window of her house. And as this thought sinks in, he likes it, so he embraces it until he loses himself in it. In the end, he finds himself as nothing more than a faceless man looking through a window.

MOTIVAZIONI DELLA SCELTA

Il personaggio senza volto del racconto, forse Napoleone, si rivela tramite il vago riferimento del titolo, ma soprattutto attraverso una serie di incursioni puntuali in episodi storici che alludono al mondo francofono dei primi anni dell'800, dalla ribellione di Haiti al Brumaire parigino.

Tuttavia, la ripetitività delle azioni ed il vuoto relazionale evocano un tempo sospeso, quasi "magico": l'autore crea potentemente un'atmosfera solipsistica irreale (per esempio con l'episodio della moneta) che sposta in realtà la vicenda in un altrove spazio-temporale, una sorta di universo parallelo, senza tempo e senza relazioni umane, che potrebbe essere quello dell'esilio a Sant'Elena o all'Elba se non fosse per il clima glaciale che lo connota.

Questo altrove è raccontato in modo convincente, ma resta soprattutto un paesaggio dell'anima, in cui il gelo e il biancore della neve sono metafora del vuoto emozionale del protagonista.

Infatti il tema principale che si palesa è la solitudine dell'esiliato, una inquietante solitudine transtemporale che tenta una esile via di comunicazione con il mondo esterno tramite la scrittura (il giornale da leggere, la scrittura *sul* giornale, la cassetta delle lettere). La scrittura così si fa carico dell'altro tema del racconto, la memoria, senza la quale l'uomo senza volto è condannato alla dissoluzione.

Dal punto di vista formale, la poesia è scritta in un inglese eccellente, in una prosa asciutta e snella, caratterizzata da un lessico referenziale e diretto, come è tipico di quella lingua.