

NATALIA GINZBURG

Natalia Ginzburg (1916–1991) is now valued as a major Italian writer of the second half of the twentieth century. She spent most of her life in the city of Turin, where she befriended the novelist Cesare Pavese and was married to Leone Ginzburg. Her husband, a scholar of Russian literature and a leader of the antifascist underground, was killed by the Nazis in 1944. She herself endured great suffering and poverty during the war, and raised her children by herself. After the war she worked for the prestigious publishing house Einaudi, married the scholar Gabriele Baldini, the model for “he” in “He and I,” and began writing her books. Family Sayings, an autobiographical novel, won the coveted Strega Prize.

*Ginzburg’s deceptively plain style, with its **homey domestic details**, everyday images, and singsong speech, effectively conveys sophisticated ideas and mature wisdom in an unintimidating manner. In her essay collection, *The Little Virtues*, the author writes about herself as if she were an ordinary girl, wife, mother, widow, with a peasant’s stubbornness and endurance. Her aesthetic and humanist viewpoint seems to have been fashioned in the same crucible as postwar neorealist Italian movies. Even her writing gift is brought down to earth, as in this passage from the essay “My Vocation”:*

When I write something I usually think it is very important and that I am a very fine writer. I think this happens to everyone. But there is one corner of my mind in which I know very well what I am, which is a small, a very small writer. I swear I know it. But that doesn’t matter much to me. Only, I don’t want to think about names: I can see that if I am asked ‘a small writer like who?’ it would sadden me to think of the names of other small writers. I prefer to think that no one has ever been

like me, however small, however much a mosquito or a flea of a writer I may be. The important thing is to be convinced that this really is your vocation, your profession, something you will do all your life.

The following essay, "He and I," captures the seesaw of human companionship and love with a patience and sensitivity to interconnectedness that it is hard to imagine a male essayist attempting, much less equaling.

He and I

HE ALWAYS FEELS HOT, I always feel cold. In the summer when it really is hot he does nothing but complain about how hot he feels. He is irritated if he sees me put a jumper on in the evening.

He speaks several languages well; I do not speak any well. He manages—in his own way—to speak even the languages that he doesn't know.

He has an excellent sense of direction, I have none at all. After one day in a foreign city he can move about in it as thoughtlessly as a butterfly. I get lost in my own city; I have to ask directions so that I can get back home again. He hates asking directions; when we go by car to a town we don't know he doesn't want to ask directions and tells me to look at the map. I don't know how to read maps and I get confused by all the little red circles and he loses his temper. *SO self deprecatory*

He loves the theatre, painting, music, especially music. I do not understand music at all, painting doesn't mean much to me and I get bored at the theatre. I love and understand one thing in the world and that is poetry.

He loves museums, and I will go if I am forced to but with an unpleasant sense of effort and duty. He loves libraries and I hate them.

He loves travelling, unfamiliar foreign cities, restaurants. I would like to stay at home all the time and never move.

All the same I follow him on his many journeys. I follow him to museums, to churches, to the opera. I even follow him to concerts, where I fall asleep.

Because he knows the conductors and the singers, after the perfor-

WOLE SOYINKA

Wole Soyinka (1934–) is a Nigerian playwright, novelist, essayist, and poet. He is best known for his innovative work in the theater, where he has mixed African folklore and mythology with Western absurdist techniques in plays such as A Dance in the Forests, The Strong Breed, Kongi's Harvest, and The Road.

During the Nigerian civil war (1967–1969), Soyinka was imprisoned without charge or trial. The Man Died: Prison Notes is a searing account of that period, particularly impressive because Soyinka continued to experiment with literary techniques in telling the story of his incarceration while living through it. "Why Do I Fast?" conveys the author's strength and utter conviction to remain true to his ideals, without, however, minimizing the inner stress and fear that the self would break down that the situation threatened. Soyinka has also written an enchanting classic of African autobiography, Ake: The Years of Childhood. In 1986 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature.

Why Do I Fast?

WH Y do I fast? I do not mean, why do I fast now? I have settled that in terms of continuing conflict. But why do I fast at all? Why have I, at any given time, suddenly decided—I must now do without food for some time? Perhaps I ought to settle that in my mind before I am trapped in a fatal demand of my own self-indulgence.

Yes, self-indulgence. A sensual self-indulgence. It is important to separate the area of will-power from the drugged immersion in rainbow-tinted ether. For I suspect that it is the truly sensual that take easily to fasting.

I have read of, but never experienced even a nearness of the sensation of freezing to death. I understand that after a while the body ceases to feel pain, sinks blissfully into sleep. Rest. I think fasting must be like that. It begins with that critical hump which is in fact a very brief passage and occurs during the first three days. The body either succumbs at this point or afterwards condemns the very thought of food. I find it best to provoke this hump as early as possible. When the decision to fast is taken, I dwell on the next meal in my mind, I let my body crave it and I let the food come to me. I am hungry. I open the dishes and sniff, I dwell on the tasting, the mastication, the swallowing. I salivate. I dwell on my body's satisfaction, the heavy body-contented sleep that must follow if I fill my hunger from this plenitude. A fierce protest commences in the pit of the stomach and I let it rage. Armed with the power of my veto, I stand aside and enjoy the violent conflict, waiting for my cue to thump the gavel. The moment arrives and I cover the food with a slow deliberate motion saying: This taste cannot die. I have known it and will know it again. Taste is selectiveness, choice. I am denied choice and thus all taste is rendered non-existent. Pleasure also is choice; it is fulfilment and choice. My existence is a crippled one, it debases fulfilment by restricting fields of fulfilment. To take pleasure in the granted area of fulfilment is self-betrayal. To eat without pleasure is to betray my nature. From now on I will not betray my nature.

Sometimes a day or two later the stomach devils come out again to play. But I view their antics with dispassionate interest. Food cannot tempt me but I wonder sometimes what I would do if I had, within reach, vitamin pills. I do after all entertain fears of the gut-walls collapsing, of unfed enzymes atrophying and dying, of perpetual damages done to the body by

excess. I know it is wiser to take a glass of orange juice a day but I am not capable of the compromise. Orange juice is too close to food. Vitamin pills on the other hand do not seem insidious saboteurs of will-power; that test has luckily never come. So I accept only a glass of water each day, sipped at intervals. I ensure that I do not exceed the one glass a day.

The body achieves, of course, true weightlessness. I am blown about by the lightest breeze, by the lightest lyrical thought or metaphor. The body is like an onion and I watch the flesh peel off, layer by layer, layer by layer. And this is the risk, it is this condition that begins the danger of self-indulgence. For, by the fourth day the will is no longer involved. I become hungry for the show-down, the moment when I must choose between death or surrender. I resent even the glass of water and begin to cheat. Each day it gets lesser by a fraction. Once, for a whole day I did not drink at all. In the morning I said, I shall drink at noon. At noon I began to cheat, procrastinating until I decided I shall drink an entire cupful when the sun goes down. I lay in bed until dark, then said, I did not see the sun go down.

What do I do all day? I watch light motes in the air. When eyes are shut a whole universe of colours fills the dome of darkness behind the eyelids. In extreme fasts the open eye is treated to the same display on a lighter, vaster scale. The air is broken up in swirls of coloured dots. Each speck of dust in a sunbeam is a fiery planet in the galaxy, its motion sedately plotted, imbued with immense significance. In the muting of sounds which overtakes the senses the mind drifts easily into transcendental moods, wiping out environment, reality, fragmenting slowly till it becomes one with specks of dust in ether.

Only sunsets prove unbearable, for while sounds are muted, colours are intensified, and the sunsets turn raw, cannibalistic, fanged and blooded as if the drooling demon of day is sinking its teeth in the lap of a loud lascivious courtesan, reeking of gore. Not so the storm-clouds with their copper rims and light golden depths hinting of caverns beyond the passages of dieties. The stars fade into nothingness; only the silence exists that brought them forth.

Rejoicing, I watch my body waste. I identify but do not prohibit the human satisfaction which comes from the pain and fear, the concern and incredulity in their eyes as the gaolers prowl round, on orders to report the slightest hint of weakening. Something in me, a glee I recognize as profoundly human laughs and condescends when a warder stops and says, "Please, this is not possible. You must stop." The Grand Seer enters . . . "I have come to beg you. I ask you to think of your family, your wife, your children." I protest—but I am well and strong. "You cannot see yourself. I can. We all do. You don't know what you look like. You are a living skeleton."

It is strange, but the effect they all have on me is to resent even that cup of water. Each time the Grand Seer has turned up I have thrown the rest away. His concern adds to the growing sense of superhumanity. I need neither drink nor food. Soon I shall 'need' no air.

The hallucinations, the brief fainting spells in which walls, earth and sky move suddenly about me I accept and control. And so I know it is no illusion when one night I detect the motion of a terrestrial object among the stars. Seeking beyond stars into that pool of silence I fasten suddenly on this fluid speck, sedate and self-assured in its predetermined orbit. Another hallucination? The passage was brief since I could only follow its motion through my barred window. Yet I am so certain that I wait again the following day and the next. And remember its identity. A heavenly body but a human satellite. The immensity of the moment—the moment of certainty—becomes imperishable. Locked and barred from a more direct communion, a human assertiveness has reached me through the cosmos, a proud, inextinguishable promethean spark among dead bodies, astral wraiths, failed deities, tinsel decorations in barren space. Sign, probe and question I accept you, incandescent human dare. Extension of my restless eye and mind I claim you and absorb you. I transmit you, pore of my skin, electronic core of my will, prow! . . . prow! . . .

Tenth day of fast. By day a speck of dust on a sun-beam. By night a slow shuttle in the cosmos. Night . . .

A clear night, and the moon pouring into my cell. I thought, a shroud? I have returned again and again to this night of the greatest weakness and lassitude, to the hours of lying still on the stark clear-headed acceptance of the thought that said: it is painless. The body weakens and breath slows to a stop. Gone was the fear that a life-urge might make me retreat at this moment. I held no direct thought of death, only of the probable end of a course of action, I felt the weakness in the joints of my bones and within in the bone itself. A dry tongue that rasped loosely in the mouth. I felt a great repose in me, an enervating peace of the world and the universe within me, a peace that truly "passeth all understanding." I wrote . . .

*I anoint my flesh
Thought is hallowed in the lean
Oil of solitude
I call you forth, all, upon
Terraces of light. Let the dark
Withdraw*

*I anoint my voice
And let it sound hereafter
Or dissolve upon its lonely passage*

*In your void. Voices new
Shall rouse the echoes when
Evil shall again arise*

*I anoint my heart
Within its flame I lay
Spent ashes of your hate—
Let evil die.*

No one came on the eleventh day. I thought the gaoler when he peeped in my cell looked wary, even frightened. I mistook the cause. It had happened. It was happening, happening even then. I understood now why the Seer had laid waste their paradise. I understood when they stormed into my Crypt the following day, the twelfth, questioning and threatening. I wedged myself between door and wall for support, seeking to disguise my weakness. It was a long way, a long height from which to cast down my gaze and understand. The sounds, the words, the gestures were plain and yet remote. The presence of strange faces, and the Grand Seer among them concerned me crucially but did not touch me. I saw and pitied his bafflement. They paused often waiting, pauses of increasing desperation. I watched them hang upon my silence yet I could only think, But what is it? What do you want of me? Why should you want of me?

I need nothing. I feel nothing. I desire nothing.

Were these new kingdoms which that sage hermit sought, the kingdoms of nothing? Or did he speak, as being replete in his own being, spurning all exterior augmentation?