

JOHN VANDERSLICE

Mendicant

1.

When he looks at the crowd he looks at me the longest. Or maybe it is that when his black eyes focus on me the dark painful burning I feel is so difficult to bear that each moment seems to last until the very end of my bearing. As if my lungs were unable to move. As if my skin were on fire. As if bones would erupt. My forehead grows hot; my stomach cramps; my teeth hurt; my shoulders shake inside. This goes on forever. Then his eyes move to someone else. This is how he preaches: one by one by one by one. Whole years pass beneath his gaze.

2.

My mother chops roots. Her heavy, fleshy, blistered hands take four at a time and hold them as if trying to choke them. She slams down the blade and the roots split into shards. With the bladeless hand she gathers up the shattered pieces and puts them into a pile at the edge of the chopping block. In the other hand is the blade, which she holds just above her ear, edge pointed downward, daring the roots to scramble. Next to the root pile are groups of slaughtered vegetables: carrots, onions, leeks. Next to the vegetables is a pile of lamb, knifed into squares. This is how my mother works.

She cuts everything into the size she wants and positions them just where she wants them to be, while the kettle sits on the fire growing hotter and hotter. Too hot. The water boils, even runs over, but that does not distract my mother. Let it boil all it wants. She grabs, chops, and piles until she is done. I think: Why not throw the lamb in? Why not the carrots? Why not tame the boiling water? All the tastes will run together anyway.

My mother will begin cooking when she is ready.

3.

He talks about fifteen hundred years ago, when our Lord walked the earth. He talks as if fifteen hundred years ago were seven days. He does not talk like the others. The preacher last week talked about vice. They all talk about vice. And death. And vengeance. They all talk about death and vengeance. And justice. Then they ask to be fed. This one with the angry black eyes and cut on his cheek and gnats in his hair talks about evenness of heart. He talks about emptying hearts. He stares at me and says I must let go of vengeance as if it were a danger to me, my own personal poison. An actual toxin eating into the organ and rendering the vessel

ineffective. I burn while he speaks. I can't help it. Teeth, head, stomach. How is this message meant for me?

4.

When she is done with the chopping, when all the piles are full and when all have been tossed sequentially into the water—lamb, vegetables, roots—and after she cleans the muck off her hands, my mother turns to the bread. The dough has been sitting at the stone while she was at the chopping block. Now she grabs the dough, fully risen. She takes it and throws it upon the stone, breaking its back. She pounds it with her right fist, flattening the face, leaving on it imprints of her knuckles. Then she folds the dough over, covering the damage, and pounds again. This she repeats. She repeats. Finally, she tears the pile into eight separate strips. She pulls the strips with both hands until they are the length she wants: the size of newborn babies. She puts them in the oven over fire.

5.

Others talk about the end of the world. We expect him too to talk about this. But he talks about the end of our hearts. What can and must replace violence in the heart. He says the violence inside us is the only real cataclysm, the only thing that can extinguish us. Not fire or lightning. Not the flood. Not famine. Not the

sword. I am not afraid of flood or famine, he says. I am not afraid of the sword. The crowd does not understand. Nor do I. Whose sword? I hear muttering. A few leave. Many stay. It is a bigger crowd than yesterday, and bigger than two days before. We do not understand this preacher, but he is being talked about. He is being decided upon. In some houses he is fed.

6.

He eats wildly, as if he were afraid we would take his plate away. Or trying to beat us to seconds. Maybe that is exactly what he is doing. But there is plenty of stew. Mother saw to that. This is how she entertains. He could eat four more bowlsful and there would still be stew. But how do I say this to him? How do you say this to a holy man? *Slow down.* Just look at him: the broth running out both sides of his mouth and onto his beard, the oily beads and slimy drizzle accumulating on his chin. Look at how his jagged teeth rip at our bread like a hound's would. Look at his eyes as he works the material over and over single-mindedly, ending in a swallow.

7.

My father speaks. After here, where do you go?

Asti is only a two day walk, he says. I have been there before.

When were you there?

He seems surprised—or something—by the question.

I do not know. When is difficult to remember when I am gone for so long. For me there is no opposite of being gone. As there is no opposite of now. There is no past. There is no then. There is no when.

My father blinks.

All I know, the preacher says, is that I have been there before. Just as I have been here.

He means our village.

Father blinks again. My mother twists her heavy hands like they are ends of a rope she must knot. She emits a sound. We talked about this before he arrived. Not one of us has ever seen him before. He is brand new. Yet he seems to know us.

How successful has your mission been, my father asks. I mean here, now, this time.

The preacher considers the question.

As successful as ever, he says. His eyes roam the table, looking for foodstuffs.

8.

You've heard what they say, haven't you, Filippo says.

What?

Why am I even asking? I don't trust this boy.

They say he is guilty of capital crimes. In another place. Unspeakable crimes. This is why he preaches under an assumed name.

I want to ask him 'What is a capital crime?'

But what I say is: A capital crime. As if I'm thinking it over, feeling the texture of the idea between the fingers of my mind. Not denying it, not getting angry about it, but staying distant from it. A sweet and sour taste my mind must suck on for a while. *A capital crime.*

Filippo begins to giggle.

You are so stupid, he says.

9.

There are rumors now. Some of them bad. This preacher is the infamous rapist of Mantua. He is a houseservant from Genoa who murdered his master and mistress in their bed. He escaped jail just before his execution. The preacher once led a group of highwaymen who worked the road between Parma and Bologna. He was notoriously brutal, intent on other's riches.

But there are other, different rumors. For instance: Piero. Piero was born without a right arm; he has nothing but fingers on that shoulder. The fingers cannot move; they lie like dead plants blown over by the wind. Frequently I see Piero struggling in the village, trying to carry things—a stool or a chicken or a blanket—with his one good arm. He does not complain; he does not whimper; he does not show sad eyes. But neither does he smile. Never does Piero look as if he believes in the Lord's blessings. He must be acutely aware of the intractable physical difference in himself. I

cannot imagine living with that knowledge day after day. I could not do it.

It is widely reported now that the preacher gave Piero an arm, beautiful and perfect: smooth, white, tender, flexible. Truly a newborn arm. It is said that Piero smiles constantly. He never stops smiling.

10.

The crowd is much larger today and more intent. This is not to say that they believe him any more acutely than the crowd from yesterday. They are simply more curious. They have heard the rumors. They want a miracle.

The preacher is motioning with his arms. He is jabbing the air with his index finger, pointing it like a spear.

You have it wrong, the preacher says. We all do. The Age of Miracles has not passed.

An excited buzz.

He pauses. He looks at us: one by one by one.

But the miracles you look for have.

Silence.

The miracles given in this age are not outwardly visible. They are in-visible. They dwell inside us, because there is the true battleground of the Lord.

He pauses. The crowd murmurs and shifts. They do not accept what he is saying. Or they do not understand it. I, at least, do not.

Do you not think the Lord could raise a

mountain at my feet if he wanted to? Do you not think he could cure any disease among you? Do you not think that, in fact, he could raise the dead buried in that graveyard?

More mumbling. Some look toward the field, its little stone markers. As if they expect to see something.

Do you not think so? the preacher says. If he wanted to?

No one answers him. His eyes are black and frustrated.

But the Lord does not want to. The Lord wants to meet and fight the enemy in your hearts. The enemy who generates violence there. The Lord wants only clear hearts. He wants the heart of an angry man emptied and changed.

He pauses. He looks at us.

That would be a miracle, he says.

11.

I try to push my way through the crowd to get closer, but people are rude. They do not move. They block my way. I catch pieces of his sermon in the air above my head and glimpses of his face in the spaces of crooked arms. I am determined to be in front, like yesterday. Like all the other days. I push against two legs. I push. I break free into the space, stumbling as I do. Simultaneously, a hand grabs my cloak by the neck and pulls me backward. I hit legs and land in a pile of me. I hear a grunt and a dirty

word from above. But they let me stay there: at the front of the crowd. They forget about me. It is not me they care about. It is him.

He spies a corpse of a mullet turning brown and gray in the dirt. He reaches to the ground behind him and picks up a stick: about a yard long and tapered at one end. He came prepared? He walks intently toward the dead fish, staring at it as if it might harm him. He stops. He raises the stick, showing a string of sinewy muscles in his shoulder and upper arm. He is lean but raw. He has given up all from life except for what he actually needs. This, I see, has made him strong. He holds the stick still, then flashes it downward, stabbing the mullet in the gills behind its eyes. When he raises the stick again, the fish is suspended like a hanged man on one end: its body pointed upward, its eyes stunned, empty, open.

He turns to the crowd and holds out the stick.

Look, he says. Poisoned hearts.

12.

Filippo threw rocks at me today. A bold act, not far from my home. Some others were with him. I do not know who. I was nearly home when I felt a small, hard tap on my cheek. I turned in that direction and felt a much harder smack in the center of my forehead. Another on my shoulder. A third against my nose. I stumbled backward, arms raised against the

bombardment, dizzy in my legs and hands and fingers. I still did not know who was doing this until I heard a familiar giggle. Then others. I lowered my arms to say something to them but was hit by another volley. I fell down. I rolled over. I opened my mouth to cry.

Filippo was laughing.

Stupid, stupid, stupid.

Yes, yes, called the others.

I lay as still as I could. I covered my head with my arms.

13.

I am covered by a blanket. I am staring straight ahead.

What's the matter with you, my mother says.

Nothing.

Are you ill?

Mother is the first to assume that anyone in our household is sick. It is one of her fears. She feels my head. She feels my throat. She tells me to open my mouth.

I am not ill.

Do it, she says.

I open my mouth. She looks. Her eyes do not change. She says nothing.

Close your mouth, she says.

What is the matter with you?

When I finally speak, moments later, I have forgotten her question.

Mother, I say, shouldn't we do something for the preacher?

Her expression changes as the thoughts behind her expression move: too swiftly, rushing in and fighting each other for control. Finally she orders her thoughts. I can see it happening as she stands before me. Her face cools and stiffens. Her eyes narrow.

We made him dinner, she says.

I was thinking of something more permanent.

She does not even ask. She turns away and goes to her new batch of bread. She lifts a mound of dough from the bowl and slams it against the stone. She makes a fist and punches the dough. She folds the white moist slab and pushes it down. She punches again.

I was thinking that we could let him come here whenever he returns. If he returns.

Oh, he will, she says. Have no doubt about that.

Then he will need a place to stay.

Fold, push, punch. Fold, push, punch.

Mother?

14.

In the evening she finally says it. The man is dangerous. The time of the prophets is passed, she says. The age of miracles is over. To believe otherwise is to court evil. Why did we have him here for dinner?

It never hurts to keep an open mind, father says. It is not that I am about to enlist with him and go begging. I am merely curious. And

since when is it risky to be hospitable?

When you are being hospitable to the devil.

Father laughs.

Mother looks at him as if she might attack.

Have you not heard what people say? she says. What he's done?

Gossip, my father says. Rumors.

He moves his hand lightly, as if shooing flies.

He ate like a pig. Did you see him? Did you see the way he ate my dinner? He killed it. He killed it like a demon would. He gorged on it like a dirty demon's pig.

Father laughs again, but more gently.

The Baptizer, he says, came out of the desert dressed in rags, eating wild locusts and honey.

So this pig is the Baptizer now? Have you lost your mind?

Father smiles. No, he says.

Besides, when have you ever cared about being hospitable?

He shrugs.

Runaways, handymen, traveling actors, the poor, the crazy, criminals, sinners. Our village sees such people passing through every day and you show no concern for being hospitable.

Father says nothing.

Neighbors, fishermen, the old parents of our most noted citizens. People we respect. When have we had any of them here for dinner?

Father looks at her. His laugh is gone. His eyes are cold.

It does not hurt, he says.

15.

This is the next to last day and the crowd is the biggest yet. Many gawkers. There is a constant, muted rumble along the border of the assembly: comers and goers. Comments. Reports. Conversations. Farewells. Even the inner crowd shifts. Sometimes I see him, sometimes I don't. I have trouble forcing my way to the front. I see him once for a few minutes straight. He says that the Evil One is inside us, just as God is inside us. This is a fair challenge, he says. This is a difficult challenge. However, it is not a challenge we cannot win, that we are not supposed to win. Indeed, he says, we are required to win it.

There is a shout near the rear of the crowd followed by a blur of discussion. I do not know what they are talking about. After all, what the preacher just said he has been saying for days. I look toward the back of the crowd and then I see. Piero is there, confused by all the attention. He glances at the assembly and moves on, a collection of small timber held in the crook of his left arm. On his right shoulder are only fingers.

16.

It is the last day. The crowd is larger, but most are hecklers. They have gotten over their fear of him. He has become too familiar. He has not performed miracles.

He does what he always does: he stares. One

by one by one by one. He looks at me finally, but does not signal with his head. He does not smile or nod. His eyes show no look of recognition even though I have been here every day. He preaches for twenty minutes on the conversion of hearts. He talks about violence in the heart, but with each minute the crowd takes him less seriously. They repeat his words. They call out silly questions. They question his clothes. He stops and stares at them, black-eyed, not responding to their words, but not denying them either.

I cannot take much more of this. Can he not see what is happening?

I eye one of the hecklers. He is not far from me. I ram him in the waist with my head. The man shouts. I feel arms on my shoulders and then I am being spun, away from this man, out of the boundary, across a blurry landscape. I fall. I hear chuckles and snickers. I get up. I charge again. But the crowd has closed and will not let me within a foot of the heckler. They push me away, hard. I trip. I hit the ground a second time and roll. I taste hot granules of dirt along my tongue. It rings my lips, scars my nose and cheeks. I hear him trying to preach. I hear the hecklers. I begin to cry. I do not know where my mother or father is. Dirt sits at the top of my mouth, in my throat. Soon it will be in my stomach.

The preacher stops speaking. For a moment I hear nothing.

I am finished, he says.

Good, someone says. We are finished with you.

Laughter. I see a rock fly. More laughter. Then a hurrah. The crowd begins to pulse with excitement. A space momentarily opens and I see the preacher wrestling with another man. They separate accidentally. The other man is skinny, thin-faced, and hollow-eyed, as ghoulish as a starving peasant. He is scowling. Then a ragged, defiant smile crosses his face. He wants the preacher to see that smile. The preacher does. He attacks: teeth bared, face set, arms stretched to reach this peasant's body. My view is blocked but I hear more shouts. A big cheer. I see again. I see the preacher push the man

away deliberately. There is a foot of space now between them. The preacher's eyes are a dead black. The other man's face is pinched and arrow-like, no longer smiling.

The preacher's arm flashes out. He hits the man in the face, his fist squarely meeting the man's nose. The preacher's other fist follows against the right cheek. The first fist again against the left. The man falls backward to the ground, holding his ruined face. The preacher yells at him to get up. But he cannot. The preacher steps forward, ready to meet the man if and when he rises. This man or some other. The black-eyed preacher doesn't care. He looks at all of us now, out for blood. 