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ALÉIX
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*houses flicker like grinning ghosts
in the violet hour*



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Altitude

by

Thomas
STRØMSHOLT



Les Éditions de L'Oubli
Bucharest, 1945

LES ÉDITIONS DE L'OUBLI
For Katri, with Love & Gratitude
Frontispiece photography:
A House at Dusk on Hristo Botev Street
Bucharest ■ Copenhagen
You Begin to Understand
1943

*"Life itself is but the shadow of death, and
souls departed but the shadows of the
living: All things fall under this name.
The Sun itself is but the dark
simulacrum, and the light but
the shadow of God."*

Thomas BROWNE,
The Garden of Cyrus



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In Search of the Hidden City

*'I am half sick of shadows,'
said The Lady of Shalott.*

Sometimes it seemed to her as if reality hesitated in a superposition of infinite possibilities.

She saw houses flicker like grinning ghosts in the violet hour. She saw their featureless façades flake away like old skin revealing their brittle bones; a concrete block of flats opened its flat gaze towards the pale blue sky, its tiles swelling to form a voluptuous cupola; an office building was slowly enveloped in an embrace of lush ivy and blossoming periwinkle; and whichever way she turned her eyes, walls grew extravagant ornaments and carved figures, balustrades stretched upwards, and balconies bloomed forth, gushing white oleander trees

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and pale green palms; lank towers and golden spires rose toward the sky, verdigris domes mushroomed; and on the ground, streets and alleys melted away like glaciers, water flowed freely through the city's decalcified vessels; and from the numerous canals, whose dark water surface was sprinkled with the silvery flakes of the sharp morning sun, a faint, melodious sound of lapping water was heard.

Then she felt a violent pull, and the possibilities collapsed in a mad, spinning motion, and she was awake in the crummy apartment, cracked ceiling, empty bottles and dirty curtains, awake to another pale morning in the same old city. And yet not quite the same.

A smile played on Elene's dry lips as she looked out of the open window. A non-human change had come over Copenhagen; she felt the change pulsate through her body, she could smell it in the air and hear it in the modulation of birds' voices: the sun had passed through the vernal equinox, and winter had turned finally to spring.



It is with houses and people as with dogs and dog owners; they frequently share characteristics to an unnerving degree. The boarding house was scruffy, the walls bled with damp, and it reeked of old sweat. The host was balding at

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the crown, and the pomaded comb-over failed to conceal it. His shirt, wrinkled and unwashed, was unbuttoned to reveal a hairy chest, obviously his pride. At the sight of Elene, he licked his lips and smoothed the comb-over.

She climbed the stairs to the second floor. It had been nearly three weeks since last she heard from Lubb, and it worried her. She knocked on the door three times and waited. Although she had not really expected him to be in, the silence of the room dispirited her.

Downstairs again, the host addressed her with a rhetorical question: “Been calling on Mr Lubb, have you?”

Outside the cold November rain battered down, but in the lobby it was like a hothouse full of rotting organic matter. Elene wanted most of all to return home, and maybe try some other day, or wait until Lubb contacted her. But she halted, and replied with a nod.

“Mr Tomas Lubbert hasn’t shown himself for more than a fortnight,” the host went on. “See, honey, I keep an eye on my lodgers. Can’t be trusted, especially not his kind. Not that I’m racist, but I’ve been around long enough to know what I’m talking about. They’re here today, gone tomorrow – without paying the rent of course.” He scrutinized her. “Wouldn’t be surprised if your boyfriend just up an’ left.”

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Elene just let the words slide past. She said, "I'd be grateful if you will allow me to visit Mr Lubbert's room."

"Sorry, honey, it's against house policy."

Elene produced a crumpled bank note from her hip pocket and placed it on the desk and said, "Perhaps exceptions can be made?"

"Only in the case of relatives."

"He's my brother." Another note was sacrificed.

The host licked his lips. "Must've been blind to have missed the likeness," he said.



The factory building lay like a rotting whale washed up on a desolate shore, a ruin surrounded by debris, waste, and vacant lots. The upper floor windows stared blankly into a night of coffee grounded darkness. The lower windows were boarded up, and the metal doors were locked. But there is always a crack, a hole, a secret passage.

The oil-stained concrete floor, long ago stripped of machines, was covered with broken glass, screws, nails and litter. A stench of urine and moisture pervaded the air. Crumbling pipes crept like brittle bones along walls bleeding rust. A fragile silence ruled the building. Earlier, a heavy rain had fallen, and the silence was occasionally

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broken by echoing drips. It was a silence so fragile that she hardly dared breathe. And yet she whispered:

“We’re faded memories on the threshold of amnesia.”

“Saprophytes sucking nourishment from the dying.”

“Touch me here.”

Lubb stiffened, his eyes twitching in the pale light of the moon. She watched his pupils dilate like gushing ink, almost drowning the brown irises, and she imagined herself submerged in that inky blackness. She took his hand, put it under her blouse, and the touch of his cold fingers made her shiver.

“Fissures run through the foundation. I’m afraid to look down for fear of what I might see.”

“If nothing is real there can be no illusion.”

“Show me that the floor is firm.”

“As firm as rusty nails and broken glass.”

“Do you love me?”

“No.”

“Good. Now touch me here ...”

And they left blood in the dusty, dirty concrete.



The cramped room consisted of a small table, an unmade bed, and books piled on the floor along the walls. Below the

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table was an old, almost antique computer case in an obvious state of disrepair. The wallpaper was faded to a nondescript colour, and the only window overlooked a narrow backyard. On the windowsill was an ashtray that brimmed with cigarette butts. The air was stuffy and damp-stained, and the rain that drummed against the window made the room even more sad.

Lubb always came to her place, and it was the first time she saw his room. The lack of order was consistent with certain aspects of Lubb's personality: his erratic behaviour, experiments with different drugs, insomnia, and the frequent mood swings. But there was another side to Lubb, a radiant purity like a sunflower growing on a heap of junk ...

She seated herself, lit a cigarette, and stared into the dusty face of a large CRT monitor. A yellow Post-It was stuck on the dead screen:

*When the moon tide rises, the corners corner you,
streets lose their way, and houses quiver and crumble
away.*

The scrawled note reminded her of something he had once said, or perhaps written, but immediately she could not place it.

Apart from the bulbous monitor, the table was a clutter of battered paperbacks, papers, and sepia-coloured prints

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of panoramic cityscapes. Conspicuous among the paperbacks was a large octavo in a red binding which she recognized immediately as Tajny Pruvodce's *Copenhagen Peregrinations*. Lubb's copy, the 1877 first edition, abounded with city maps, and the margins were filled with notes in his cramped longhand. This volume had been his dearest possession, or perhaps his obsession, and it was hard to believe that he would leave it behind ... unless he had meant for her to find it.

Then again, something awful might have happened to him, and as she tried not to imagine the manifold possibilities of violent deaths, an icy draft began to rise, and she heard the familiar muted howl of the abyss.



Ever since the tragedy, she had walked on brittle glass, afraid to lower her gaze lest she should see the cracks spreading beneath her feet. Restless and sleepless, she began to drift like an empty packet of cigarettes caught by random winds through desolate night streets, across squalid squares, past empty churches and culs-de-sac, until exhaustion would finally replace anxiety. But for a short while only.

One night she was brought to a towering black, ramshackle building. Afterwards she would tell herself that it

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was curiosity that made her trespass when in fact she entered the condemned office block believing it would somehow offer release, or comfort, or sanctuary. Inside the abandoned building, among rows of emptied file cabinets, ruined furniture, broken coffee cups, she experienced a quiet which nestled her body and filled her haunted skull out with a deep, deep calm. The next day she returned with a camera in order to document the strange, soothing calm.

From then on, she began to explore the condemned and forgotten buildings and spaces above and below the city, quickly developing dependence. Via the Net she came into contact with a secret society of people whose one common denominator, beyond a prevalent disposition to insomnia, was that they were drawn towards the abandoned spaces, the silence of ruins, and the aesthetics of decay. This was how she met Lubb who had already acquired a reputation among the society of urban explorers despite his youth.



The streets were flooded with sodium and neon Christmas lights, streams of late shoppers and vendors hurried senselessly about. Elene felt her throat contract and turned her gaze upwards as if to escape, but above her, the multitudinous city lights had turned the cloudy night sky into a

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soiled orange shroud or a veil behind which the waxing moon was faintly seen as a blurry white blotch. Finally, she turned into a less busy side street and continued, now a lonely figure, towards Brook Street.

Some time before he disappeared, Lubb had told her: “Many of the old streams, brooks and canals still have their course beneath the asphalt and flagstones. If one listens carefully, they can be heard as a faint murmuring.” She knelt on the cold ground and listened. But although Brook Street was desolate and quiet, she heard nothing; she had not really expected to.

Tired and depressed, she sauntered about the sleepy district. A slightly curved and badly lit lane brought her past a narrow passage blocked by a wooden fence. Framed by a decrepit building on each side, the half rotten fence was painted with sigil-like graffiti tags and plastered by torn posters. She framed the scene with her hands, cocked her head, thinking it would make a nice motif if only she could capture its decaying aesthetics.

Her eyes widened as the fence began to metamorphose before her. The edges shimmered like gold and a strong glow came through the cracks in the wood as if it were being lit from the other side by a yellow light projector or a flaming bonfire. The vision was of short duration, a mere

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flash wherein the passage expanded, and in the distance she glimpsed an organic geometry washed in a blazing sunlight, which was reflected and intensified by the water's clear surface, and heard the quiet murmuring streams ... She blinked, and immediately the marvellous scene lapsed into drab commonness.

Back in her apartment, she searched through Lubb's city maps. Using thick red and black felt-tip pens, he had meticulously traced the canals, waterways and brooks that once ran through the old port, adding the projected or imagined waterways. Supposedly a brook had its course below what was now Brook Street. Around 1750, according to Pruvodce's *Copenhagen Peregrinations*, it had been proposed to transform the brook into a canal connected to the then existing main canals. Consulting the maps again, she discovered that the connection ran through the strange, unnamed passage.

At the coming of dawn, Elene stumbled into bed, but in her dreams she proceeded to peregrinate through the occult layers of the city.



She was in Riga when Lubb mailed his last message. Another amateur photographer had offered her a lift to what

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was supposed to be a short trip. But her stay was prolonged when she was caught by the *policija* and had to explain why she was trespassing in an abandoned orphanage to photograph dusty rooms, mouldering beds and mutilated dolls. The problem was not so much the language barrier, for few people comprehended the fascination of these pockets in time and space where nothing happened but the slow decay which would eventually reduce everything to nothing; and as a mere observer of that process, she took care not to disturb anything. In the end she was released only to find her acquaintance had moved on, and with little money left, the homeward journey was long and hard.

Lubb wrote: *Remember that passage from Pruvodce's work wherein he writes of the influence of the waxing moon on the "forgotten aqueducts"?* He knew the secret of Copenhagen, the city's hidden cities, and in his psychotopography he left clues, codes, hints. If I understand him correctly, the chances of finding that which is implied or veiled by the present city will be greatest around the ecliptic. I believe that my research is nearing some kind of end. Forget the ruins and their silence, for theirs is the silence of death: there is another place.

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Since then, he had been off-line; since September he had not set foot in the boarding house; since autumnal equinox no one had either seen or heard from him.



The January sun spilled its blinding white light over the city. It had rained in the course of the night, and the dull black asphalt of the streets was transmuted into rivers of melted gold; when she screwed up her eyes, the streets looked like the canals from her dreams, the canals coursing through a Copenhagen that was not Copenhagen. What is a city?

In present day Copenhagen, one may discern the remnants of former epochs, wrote Pruvodce: The old yellow wings of Christian IV is a tale told in stone of times lost but not completely abandoned; walking the short distance from Thot's Mansion to the Royal Theatre, one covers a distance of one hundred years: this is evident to all but those who are too busy to open their eyes.

But even to the casual stroller who takes an interest in the scenery, much remains invisible, for the naked eye sees not the old canals, lanes, streets, courts and squares that gave way to new town planning; all the

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palaces, mansions, churches, houses, et cetera that were lost to fire or simply fell to decay: all that glory which now resides in memories and sediments only.

But a city is more than stone, rubble, and ashes: sedimented deep within its history are the multifarious architectural reveries or prospects which never materialized, the marvellous palaces that remained castles in the air – the Citta del Sole of Christian V – the canals of Axel Urup – the visions of poets – the dreams of its citizens ... In order to behold a city in its entirety, one must make use of more than one's corporeal senses.

Through the din of morning traffic, she heard the gentle lapping from the canals on Slotsholmen. With her back to the canals, the short fishwife stood in granite melancholy, a monument of past times like the sooty murals of healthy workmen on Thorvaldsen's Museum. The slate grey surface of the water was ribbed by the cold wind, and she shook herself involuntarily.

Little was known of Tajny Pruvodce. From some Eastern European province he had travelled via Germany to Copenhagen in the early eighteen-fifties where he was employed as secretary to Professor Hans Jørgen Koch, the architect. From the years between Koch's death in 1860 to

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the publication of *Copenhagen Peregrinations*, the information was scant; he was unmarried and lived, it seemed, in obscurity.

The banks and ministries of Slotsholmen huddled together like petrified frigates and heavy barges, their verdigrised copper roofs scraped against the clear sky. Above the old Rococo stock exchange the stone dragons twined their tails while eyeing the pedestrians streaming by. Neptune, standing in front of the Rococo building, cast a questioning glance at the patron of merchants and thieves who answered with a deceptive smile. Elene, peregrinating Copenhagen in search of Lubb and the cities within the city, went on.

Lubb had been on the track of something: *there is another place*. His annotated city maps provided a guide; unfortunately, his lines and circles made little sense, and Elene wandered in darkness. Doubt would sometimes come over her. Tajny Pruvodce was fifty-seven years old when he presumably committed suicide in 1878 – it was said that he suffered from “nervous fever” – but a body was never found. Tomas Lubbert was thirty-three years old when he, seduced by Pruvodce’s hints of another city, disappeared. If not for Elene’s persistent and very vivid dreams, it would be easy for her to dismiss it all as utter nonsense.

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What was she supposed to do? *In order to behold a city in its entirety, one must make use of more than one's corporeal senses.* And so she walked and walked through the city and observed the few remaining canals, listened to the course of the water; but compared to the canals of her dreams it was as if the real canals lacked texture and colour: in fact they lacked the most essential qualities of things real.

She admitted to herself that she had been unaware of how much Lubb meant until the vacuum of his absence had enveloped her. It was absurdly banal, yet without him there was but the abyss, the icy draft and the muted howls like perverted sirens singing. The one thing that kept her back from the edge, and spurred her on, was the recurring dreams of a strange cityscape.



Pruvodce's *Copenhagen Peregrinations* appeared as a topographical and historical work done in a dry and rather pompous style, except for certain Romantic or mystical passages. Lubb did not care for the so-called "nerve fever". He insisted:

"It's a mystical Baedeker."

"Or the delusions of a sick man."

"Very elaborate delusions. Look at Plate III ..."

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They were seated at a thronged and noisy café. Every other moment people jostled by, and the close proximity of strangers made Elene edgy. Lubb seemed to block it off, his whole attention absorbed by the red octavo on the table. Elene tried to concentrate on Plate III, a poorly reproduced engraving of the city anno 1745 in bird's eye view.

“What's wrong with this picture?”

“The perspective? Scale?” tried Elene.

“Strictly speaking, it is geometrically incorrect. The engraver, unknown by the way, wasn't interested in realism. In fact the engraving is a work of imaginative art. Now, try to look again, this time with a magnifying glass.” Thus saying, he reached into a bag at the floor and produced the optical instrument.

“What is it exactly I'm supposed to look for?”

“The extraordinary.”

Puzzled she moved the magnifying glass across the engraving. Her gaze halted at a building placed in the old city centre: it was a Gothic cathedral with five conical towers and abundant flying buttresses. Because of the small scale, the cathedral was almost hidden to the naked eye by the surrounding buildings. Looking closer, it seemed to her that the buttresses raised the whole building above ground.

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“Now look at Plate V.”

Presumably the said Plate offered a view of the city anno 1779, but here the artist had added a viaduct which curved and bent its way through the city’s topography. Leafing to the next Plate, a view from 1830, she discovered a row of tall, narrow houses which twisted impossibly around their own axes.

“And notice the many canals,” remarked Lubb. “Every plate is like this,” he proceeded enthusiastically, “abundant with surreal elements in the real; a psychotopography!”

“What does it mean?”

“Think about it, Elene. As secretary to Koch, Pruvodce had access to the archives of the Academy of Arts. All the town planning that for some reason or other was shelved. All the architects’ dreams and fantasies ...” His dark eyes glowed.

“So, *Copenhagen Peregrinations* is a fantasy?”

“In a sense, yes. Notice how the title suggests a pilgrimage, rather unusual for a work of topography don’t you think? This book is a map.”

“A fictive map of a fictive city dreamed up in a feverous brain.”

“Copenhagen is slowly dying. But as this city crumbles away, the city, or cities, of Pruvodce gain actuality. Many of

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the old streams, brooks and canals still have their course beneath the asphalt and flagstones. If you listen carefully, they can be heard as a faint murmuring.”

“You’re mad.”

“This is what we’re longing for.”

“No, Lubb, this is what *you* are longing for.”



The last days of February saw Elene walking the worn paving stones whose memories reached back to a time before the city, a story preserved in a layer of waste and refuse three meters deep. The streets suffered from psoriasis, the houses festered with mould fungus, and cracks ran through the sidewalks. Naked vines crept along the walls like the bulging varicose veins of elderly people. It was in this old part of the city, not far from Brook Street and the mystical passage, that an unnamed engraver had erected a surreal Gothic cathedral around 1745; and according to one of Lubb’s maps, two imaginary canals crossed each other in this quarter.

Most of the streets were narrow and curved, characteristic of a Medieval town. The earliest houses, single-storeyed with yellow plaster, dated back to the early seventeenth century; around them lay the imposing Baroque

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and Classical apartment buildings interspersed with a few dull looking block of flats from the twentieth century. It was a quiet and relatively small quarter, almost like a small town hiding within a metropolis. And yet, after three days of meandering about the curved streets, Elene had a nagging feeling that the quarter was larger than it should be: firstly, the number of streets was inconsistent with the latest map, but then every time she counted, she arrived at a new number; secondly, she often experienced disorientation.

As she became more familiar with the quarter, she discovered that this disorientation increased at certain street corners, it was as if the angles flickered in and out of focus. There were days when she felt like a half-blind idiot with no sense of direction at all, and on other days she would think of herself as a fool chasing a morpheic delusion with the conviction of a madman. But such days of dark despair were invariably followed by dreams of almost hallucinatory lucidity which renewed her hopes.

By degrees, she realized that these ups and down followed a pattern, for the peaks of her dreaming seemed to correspond with full moon and new moon. She remembered Lubb's enigmatic note: *When the moon tide rises, the corners corner you, streets lose their way, and houses quiver*

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and crumble away. Convinced that this sentence described the old quarter with its weird streets and corners, she continued her peripatetic explorations.



Blades of sunlight cut through the lead grey thunder clouds, and the din and rumble of the city sounded like a distant surf. Elene haunted the old quarter, restless and with a feverish look in her eyes. Some of the local shop keepers still eyed the lonely stranger with suspicion, and some parents would hurriedly take their children across the streets whenever they saw her, but mostly she was ignored.

She rested on a bench and began to study a creased map. On this morning a non-human change had come over Copenhagen: the vernal equinox, the arrival of spring. She unfolded the map, rose and walked on.

Shortly afterwards she rounded a street corner and walked down a street where she knew that the degree of disorientation was unusually intense. This time it came upon her suddenly like a strong gust of wind. She halted, confused and dizzy. In front of her was a narrow passage which she had never before noticed; and from that passage issued the faint melody of lapping water.

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Excited to a delirious degree, she followed the seductive sound into the passage. Dark and winding, the passage proved to be a cul-de-sac, and she was just about to turn when she noticed the door. It was a black painted door of a size so small that it appeared constructed for children. It was unlocked, and when she crossed the threshold, bending low, she inevitably thought of Alice.

In fact, this door communicated with a Wonderland of sorts. It was a large backyard, but there was nothing of that shut-inness, sadness and greyness one usually connects with these city enclosures; rather, the shape and appearance of the backyard brought to mind a Roman atrium or an artificial oasis of a Near Eastern palace. It was shaped like an octagon with very tall, white-plastered walls without windows. Almost all the surface of the walls was covered by a sea-green carpet of ivy which flowed out of the ground and mixed with wild growing plants, scented flowers and small bushes carrying violet berries. The luxuriant flora met in the centre of the yard where the sea-green cover nestled around and up the sides of a broad well, creeping round its neck and down into the black depths. And from the depths of the well rose that faint sound of water that haunted her dreams.

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A bench was placed next to the well, and here, overwhelmed with the mystery about her, she sat down. Hesitating, she reached for one of the violet berries. She feared it would dissipate like a *fata morgana*, but when the berry lay in the palm of her hand, she feared it would transform, like the gold of fairy, into a lump of coal; but the berry tasted juicy and sweet.

For a long time she sat with her eyes closed, listening to the subterranean streams. She thought of Lubb: *Forget the ruins and their silence, for theirs is the silence of death: there is another place*. Suddenly the sound of distant thunder woke her from her pleasant reveries. She was averse to leave the enchanted backyard, but night was falling.

She was unable to recall exactly where she had entered the backyard. The low door was not immediately visible through the thick ivy carpet, and after having traced the octagonal walls three times, she was still unable to locate it. She tried to call out as loudly as she was able but received only the echo of her own voice.

Again she traced the walls, searching behind the ivy cover and finding but knotty tendrils and mouldering bricks. With rising uneasiness, she wondered how many others knew of this spot. Were the dwellers behind those tall walls even aware of their wondrous backyard, or did it

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exist only in the weird engravings of *Copenhagen Peregrinations*? If the latter was true – however absurd and fantastical that truth appeared – it was probable that Pruvodce had known of this place. Likewise, Lubb might have entered this backyard on a day where the celestial bodies worked their influences in strange ways – as they did this very day. Suddenly the backyard felt like an enchanted prison, a place where people disappeared without a trace.

She walked to the well. Thick strands of ivy crept along its uneven stones and continued down into its black throat. She found a rock which she let fall into the abyss, counting the seconds, straining her ears for the sound of – nothing.

Nothing but the rise and fall of small waves from the subterranean canals.

Not knowing what to do, she once more returned to the bench. Luckily it seemed that the bad weather had passed by. Above her, the night sky was black as onyx sprinkled with the white of whirling star clusters. The ripe large moon had an intense glow, and the yard was veiled in a bluish, shimmering light. But for the tranquil sound of lapping water all was quiet.

The moonlight made the backyard appear larger. The walls had changed into dark-blue shadows fusing with the night sky above, and the ivy quivered like a veil suggesting

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unknown worlds. Something behind that veil arrested Elene's attention. Peering into the shadows she saw, by slow gradations, the black outline of the small door emerge.

As she rose and walked towards the door, she wondered briefly how she could have missed it. Bending low, she reached for the handle, but the touch sent shivers through her body. What lay on the other side? Turning the handle it seemed to her as if reality hesitated in a superposition of infinite possibilities.

The Luwisnat Transfigurations

*Is it rapture or terror that circles me around, and invades
Each vein of my life with hope – if it be not fear?*

The answer to this question posed by Swinburne in the poem, *A Nympholept*, is of crucial importance if one is to comprehend the mystical experience. One may go even further to suggest that the answer determines the experience itself.

Throughout the ages, mystics and poets have claimed that a veil has been drawn over our senses; we perceive but the surface of things, and vast realms of wonder remain hidden to us. While some people are quick to dismiss such ideas as idle thoughts or even dangerous delusions, the merest hint of an occult reality is a siren call to others – despite the apprehensiveness, or terror, such encounters may inspire.

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During my early youth, certain experiences of an extraordinary nature led me to study occultism and related matters. These experiences naturally slipped into my fiction although they really were nothing to speak of. From time to time, sometimes induced by the use of drugs, the veil flickered, and I glimpsed the shadows moving on the wall of the cave, nothing more. The unknown remained unknown.

At last I realized the problem. Jailed by Franco's *Falangistas*, and awaiting execution in his isolation cell, Arthur Koestler experienced his ego dissolve "in the universal pool". This transcendence of self corresponds to the *satori* of Zen Buddhism. According to one Zen master, illumination is attained when "the bottom of the pail is broken through".

Koestler, briefly illuminated, did not become a mystic but a parapsychologist. For years I tried to transcend the ego, but all my efforts came to nothing, and the self-loathing that followed only tightened the roots of that self. Finally, too exhausted and utterly depressed by the futility of my studies, I abandoned all spiritual and literary pursuits and left the city to live in this small town by the vast forest. But my relocation proved to be influential in ways I had neither dared imagine nor hope.

The Auwisnat Transfigurations

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The furnished bungalow which I rented was situated on the diminishing boundary between forest and the town proper. According to the owner, Mrs Munzen, who resided in a town far away, the house had been unoccupied for about six months prior to my moving in.

“The former tenant was an author of some kind,” she said. “He left without notice. Owes me for one month of rent. You’re not an author, are you?”

“No,” I immediately lied.

“Good. Not that I have a choice anyway ...” She cast her eyes about in a furtive way which I would later recall as nervous. But as the house was in a very poor condition, and had been for sale for years, I merely thought that Mrs Munzen was desperate to let it. All day long, the bungalow was shaded by tall pines, its plaster peeled, the windows were leaky, and the interior was pervaded by a fusty odour. Mrs Munzen did not need to worry though. Besides the isolated location and cheap rent, I was actually attracted to the decrepit building, perhaps because it reminded me of my own failures. I signed the contract in the safe knowledge that Mrs Munzen had never heard of my name nor was likely ever to come upon some of my insignificant writings.

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As the forest had more or less embraced the bungalow, I was soon caught up in its bustling, teeming life. It was a whole new experience to me for whom nature was an almost foreign entity. I had lived my life in the city where nature is relegated to parks or gardens and kept under a strict human regime of weeding and cutting and trimming. Should nature dare to leave its confinement, such as a vibrating green blade of grass springing forth between the cracks of the sidewalk, it is fought down with a zealousness bordering on the farcical. As my literary preferences lay in the nineteenth century, such vague conceptions of nature as I entertained were undoubtedly infused with a great deal of Romanticism.

It was no wonder then that the slightest stirring or sound of the forest would evoke dreamy associations and fantastic ideas. It was like listening to lines of poetry which, though written in code, suggested a secret, ancient life beyond the sphere of quotidian human reason. Its fauna and flora had names which to me were as esoteric and charged with occult sense as the names of demons in an old grimoire, and I spent many hours poring over botanical works.

But the abrupt transition to a habitat which practically had formed a hazy terra incognita on my mental map was not without an indefinable uneasiness. For the first many

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nights, the polyphonies of the never quiet forest kept me awake, and when finally I slipped by sheer exhaustion through the gates of sleep, the din followed, causing the most excruciating nightmares.

In the day time too, during my solitary walks in the woods, I sometimes experienced an inexplicable anxiety. For no cause that I could discern, my hairs would stand on end and my skin would crawl with the suddenness of a lonely cloud darkening the sun, and the sensation would depart as swiftly. It was as if I had passed through a misty sphere of evil, and invariably I would glance about, at times even emitting a nervous, "Hello?", half expecting to confront a beast of prey, half aware of how ridiculous my reactions were.

By accident more than by experiment, I discovered that the unpleasant sensation returned if I retraced my steps, and if I stopped dead in my tracks as soon as the uneasiness came upon me, the feeling would linger. Thus it appeared that the sensation was bound or limited to certain spots such as a short stretch of an overgrown footpath, a small glade, a lichen-covered stub or a particular tree. In fact, trees seemed to be, so to speak, at the root of the mystery. This was a revelation that dawned by slow degrees through the sketches I made in my notebook. Sketching was a mere

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habit with no pretension of artistic value, and I suppose that was why I enjoyed doing it. The intriguing spots were a natural choice to attempt to reproduce in pencil. Twenty or so pages had been filled out when I noticed that each of these crude tableaux included trees grown crooked. The way their roots twisted and their trunks curved in conjunction with a couple of gnarled nether boughs made some of these crooked trees resemble human bodies petrified in a grotesque dance ... or in agony.



For all the vague fear that the spots inspired, the phenomenon was not without thrill and fascination, and with nothing better to do with my time, I began to mark the uncanny spots on a map of the forest. I not only revisited the spots but actively sought out new ones.

The worst spot by far, and by that same token also the most fascinating, was situated deep in the woods. A few weeks after I came to live here at the forest's edge, I was following a path through the woods which was not outlined on the map. Since the map dated back ten years, it was easy to roam the forest with a sense of adventure, a feeling that was augmented by the vast area it covered and the fact that I hardly ever met any other people during my

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walks. Following this track for about an hour, my attention was drawn to a tall oak with a peculiar shape.

It was in fact two oaks which had grown into one, its lower part consisting of two knotty trunks which met in an imperfect Roman arch. Thus the lower part of the tree looked like a gateway, and indeed it fronted a glade otherwise nearly hidden by trees while, if one stepped back to get a fuller view, it bore a resemblance to the human form. At the foot of the oak, or rather its two feet, someone had left a small earthenware bowl. A diffuse greenish light filtered through the quivering leafage, and for a moment I felt almost tranquil as if the soft light were seeping through my very being. Then, gazing upwards into the light, I saw with wonder that some of the nether boughs were decorated with strips of red cloth.

As I neared the tree with a mind to enter the glade, I experienced a sudden drop of the humid temperature while the woods about me became conspicuously silent. No shrill bird cries cut through the woods, not the slightest bough stirred, and even the soft murmur of leaves had been suspended. It was perhaps this unnatural silence which was the most frightening. I could not go on; I simply froze.

The whole atmosphere of the forest was charged with violence. It felt as if a thousand eyes lurked from behind the

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dense undergrowth and the lush mosaics of leaves, as if the forest itself had transformed into one organism intent on scaring off an unwelcome intruder. The tension was unbearable. When eventually I regained control of my limbs, it was only to carefully turn about and retreat. To my relief the temperature soon returned to normal and so did the numerous bird cries and all the familiar rustle and murmur of silvan life.

However fascinating the experience at the anthropoid oak was, it was wrought with a warning: *Nec plus ultra*, and I felt no immediate desire to venture a second visit.



Although I hesitated to assign any ontological reality to the fear-inspiring spots, they were a source of endless rumination and wild conjecture. I had plenty of time and quiet to pursue these dark matters.

Most of the dwellings in the vicinity were left to slow decay, and the few people who remained kept to themselves. On the rare occasions when I went into town to buy such things as is necessary for one's survival or to mail a check to Mrs Munzen, the locals hardly took any interest in my person.

Thus I spent the days like a hermit in the cottage-like bungalow; reading, walking, sketching and thinking, my life

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wholly engrossed by the mysteries of the woods. But if there were, as Duke Senior says, tongues in the trees, then they spoke in a language incomprehensible to me. No matter how hard I listened, no matter how patiently I observed the movements of the forest, its words never rose above a mumble, its real and hidden life kept eluding me.

On a showery day in the beginning of May, though, chance brought me further intimations of the mystery. Some of the gloom of that day had penetrated my mood, and I just sat in the dark and dank living room counting the hours and smoking cigarettes. Suddenly, between showers, a little sunlight penetrated the palisades of trees, and a flicker of greenish-gold swayed briefly on the bookcase. As the light dissipated into nothing, I was seized with restlessness. I needed to divert my mind with something.

I had not paid much attention to the bookcase which appeared to consist of the kind of literature one finds in summer-cottages: paperback crime-novels, romances featuring protagonists of the medical profession, various manuals, cookery books, and the like. Thus the anthropological textbook looked decidedly out of place.

As I leafed through it in an absent-minded manner, a folded piece of paper detached itself and fell softly to the floor. It was a handwritten note which read:

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The ancient forest whose life follows its own cyclical course of growth and decay, a course wholly indifferent to human culture, invariably makes one tremble with an awe that indicates the presence of the numinous. Can it be this feeling of otherness – inhuman and therefore alienating – which causes my despairingly few informants to speak of an unspecified “evil from the woods”?

Evidence shows that the forest (or the entities which it symbolizes) to some degree is an object of worship. Aside from a great many so-called taboo trees, written sources refer to yearly recurring ceremonies observed in this forest around August 1st. It’s perhaps not insignificant that the date coincides with Lughnasadh, but in some of the earliest written sources (1640), August 1st is called Auwisnat or Night of Elves. From time to time, local religious authorities have banned this practice, and from what I have been able to glean from the scant sources, they more or less succeeded. But it now appears that the ancient practice has been revived. This might go some way to explain, firstly, the locals’ laissez faire attitude towards the spread of the forest, and, secondly, why it’s so difficult to gather material.

In the short span of time I have lived here, I myself can’t deny to have felt something evil in the forest: a

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breeze which makes the foliage whisper with threatening subharmonics; a disturbing play of shadows; and trees whose shapes excite impossible suggestions. This forest seems to abound with terror loci. But surely this is nonsense. It must be.

Lest I should suffer the fate of the psychiatrist who becomes persuaded by the patient's delusions and ends up on the wrong side of the desk, I must guard myself against these suggestions.

The textbook was authored by one Sylvestre Herne, professor of anthropology, and the title page carried a signature of the same name in the same hand as that of the note. It was obvious to assume that the prior occupant of the bungalow had been Dr Herne. However, it was difficult to imagine that the distinguished looking elderly man portrayed on the back of the volume was the kind of person who would leave without settling his rent.

Dr Herne's references to an *evil from the woods* and *terror loci* were somewhat reassuring as I now had to suppose that the evil spots were not a product of my morbid imagination. But at the same time, the phenomena became frighteningly real. Of course, it was possible that the anthropologist was as susceptible to imaginary impressions

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as I; in short, that we both suffered from the same delusions. I hardly knew which line of thought to prefer ...



A few days later, I made a visit to the town. It had once been a market town whose primary trade lay in timber. But first the railway system was relocated, then the government designated the forest as an area of outstanding natural beauty, and now the town was marked by closed shops, empty houses, and general neglect. The town had really shrunk to a village on the verge of becoming a ghost town.

Framing this tableau of impoverishment was the luxurious extravagance of the forest. Over the years, the forest had begun to propagate across the boundary: grasses and saplings inched closer and closer to the human habitat, here and there tough roots broke the asphalt, and weeds prospered everywhere. It was a Piranesian landscape with mouldering ruins half covered by lush vegetation; a testimony to the mortality of civilization.

On this afternoon, life in town was unusually slow paced. I wondered if Dr Herne had been correct when he noted the *laissez faire* attitude of the locals. In the bright summer light, it seemed to me that the few people I passed, grey-faced, sultry, shuffling along as if half asleep, expressed

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a deep apathy towards life. It was a fair assumption that the locals had resigned due to the hard times, but then again our fairest assumptions have a tendency of turning out wrong.

From a payphone on the town square, I called Mrs Munzen. Some personal papers of the previous tenant had turned up, and naturally I wished to forward them: did she happen to know Mr Herne's address?

"I wish," she sighed. "He's not the first, you know, to go off like that. Without a word. Without paying the rent. It's those damn crazy people, they get to them . . ." The last part ended in a snarl, but the connection was poor, and perhaps it was just static noise that I heard. I asked her to elaborate.

"It's all foolish talk," she answered, and in the same breath she reminded me – somewhat sharply, I think – of the coming day of payment. Before I managed to say another word, she hung up. Her rude manner angered me and I would probably have called her back if I had had enough small change. But at least Mrs Munzen had confirmed that the previous occupant of the bungalow really was Sylvestre Herne.

The library lay right across from the phone box. It was housed in a curious building where the stern lines of

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functionalism crashed with neo-Gothic elements. The building had once been white, I suppose, but the patches which had not yet been blanketed by green ivy, were ashen grey and cracked. All the windows were covered with grime, and I would not have been surprised to find the library shut down; the heavy door, however, gave way to my push.

The librarian was a bony creature of indeterminate age. She wore a chrysanthemum-yellow dress whose brightness contrasted with her greyish skin. Her horn-rimmed glasses were so greased that I could hardly see her eyes, and yet I felt her scrutinizing stare. Apart from that unpleasant stare, she greeted me with a stiff nod. I explained that I was looking for local folklore, specifically anything written by Sylvestre Herne.

“We are but a small library,” the librarian answered, adding, “Don’t expect to find what you’re looking for . . .” Every syllable was separated by a long pause as if either spoken by someone unaccustomed with speaking or suffering from some sort of aphasia. For reasons that I could not fathom, she seemed to be trying to discourage me. When I insisted, she finally condescended to point me to the card index.

Except for the wry librarian, I had the premises to myself. The library was as hushed as it was dusty. My fingers traced visible lines on the cabinet, and several drawers had

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to be nudged in order to pull them out. Obviously, the librarian was not troubled by borrowers. It was true, though, that the collection of folklore left much to be desired, and of course I searched in vain for items by Dr Herne. I only located a couple of items which might have been of some interest, but both of these were in storage. After filling out the forms, I went back to the librarian only to find her seat empty. Behind the desk was an office with frosted glass panes through which two silhouettes were faintly discernible. I was just about to rap on the door when something made me hesitate and eavesdrop instead.

“... young man interested in Herne,” said the librarian in her peculiar phrasing. “I don’t like it.”

“There’s no need to worry,” replied a throaty man’s voice. “Either he will become one of us or ...” and here the speaker must have turned his head because the rest of the sentence was an indistinct murmur.

A shuffling of feet warned me just in time to step away from the door, and, placing the forms on the desk, I hurried out of the library in a state of nervous excitement.



I did not return home immediately; instead I ordered some coffee at the bistro across from the library. Though I was

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the only customer, the manager, an old man with drowsy eyes and blackened teeth, took his time before bringing me a cup with a brown lukewarm substance barely resembling coffee. Smoking one cigarette after another, I tried to arrange the dark puzzles into a coherent picture. What had made Professor Herne leave the town without settling his affairs – if indeed he had left? From the scant information provided by Mrs Munzen, I gathered that the anthropologist had disappeared some time around Auwisnat. Had others disappeared too? And what exactly was I to make of those mysterious fragments that I had overheard in the library? When I added all these obscure puzzles to the *terror loci* and the references to a local celebration of Auwisnat, the hazy contours of a disturbing picture began to develop.

But this picture was to develop further that day.

The sun was shimmering behind the black trees in a blaze of red flames haloed by a rose-pink glow when I left the bistro. The sky was darkening fast in shades of turquoise, the first stars appeared like lonely diamonds on a sheet of soft satin, and waves of twilight washed over the town. I had almost reached the gravel path which led to my bungalow when I saw five or six people heading into the woods a little further down the road.

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There was something solemn about these people walking in dusk which made me think of a procession, and my curiosity was instantly roused. They carried torch lights which made it easy to trail them while the darkening twilight provided me with cover. It was thrilling. But it was not long before I began to have second thoughts. I had never before ventured into the woods after sunset. On the few occasions when I had lost track of time during my walks, I had hurried back fearing – I did not know what exactly. Perhaps it is because darkness by its nature accentuates the inherent ambiguity of things, and the forest was already playing enough tricks with my mind. Then of course there was the risk of losing one's bearings; I had not thought of that when I set off after the mysterious procession.

By degrees, the trees merged into a great wall of wavy blackness on each side of the foot path. Between the black foliage there was a rustle of shadows, unseen things twisted in the undergrowth, and once again the forest seemed to me like a living creature. Its lurking eyes pricked at my skin, and its humid breath was as palpable as the falling dew. At last it became so unnerving that I decided it was best to return home while I could still retrace my steps. As much as my own timid weakness vexed me, I had a clear idea where the procession was heading in that vast, dark forest.

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And indeed, when the next morning I went out to the two-legged oak, my theory was confirmed: somebody had been there recently. Even at a safe distance to the tree, I could see that the earthenware bowl bore traces of wine, and, significantly, that the nether boughs were decorated with new strips of cloth – chrysanthemum-yellow cloth.



There was little reason for me to check the pillar box except to empty it for advertisements and a freely distributed regional newspaper once in a while. So I was quite surprised to discover among the rubbish that a journal had been delivered. Of course it was not addressed to me but to Sylvestre Herne.

With its mishmash of quasi-scientific articles and eye-witness accounts on anything from alien encounters to sea monsters, *Journal of Cryptozoological Studies* was perhaps not irrelevant for a researcher in folklore. But it seemed unlikely that a professor would risk his academic reputation by contributing to such a journal; yet contribute he had with an article called “The People of the Forest”. Reading this article helped strengthen my resolve to visit the oak one more time.

On that May morning six days ago, a heavy rain had fallen. The light that rippled through the canopy was

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reflected by a million quivering raindrops which clung to the boughs like diamond-fitted chandeliers, other drops fell to the ground with soft, rhythmic thuds. A distant stream gurgled, and toads potted about in the rotting leaves. But for all this beauty, I still had to force myself close enough to the oak in order to perform the sacrifice. And even though I had anticipated the sudden change of atmosphere, I almost waivered with the unnatural hush and the sudden drop in temperature. It was as if all the life of the forest had been suspended between the space of a breath.

Trembling, I poured wine in the two small bowls. Then I tore the shirt into strips. It was one of my best shirts, and I actually felt a pang when tearing it apart. But what is the worth of a sacrifice if it does not entail a personal renunciation? As I finished the ritual, the air about me seemed to vibrate with a sort of expectancy; the resistance of the woods had given way to sympathy, and I felt free to proceed.

It was but a couple of feet, and yet the passage through the arched gateway felt a lot longer. Each step was dream-like, akin to walking underwater. But as soon as I had crossed the weird threshold and entered the glade, everything about me seemed to reverse to normal.

The glade was larger than I had assumed. It was shaped like a badly drawn circle, the grass stood tall, and vibrant

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wild flowers lured butterflies and droning insects to their whorling petals. On the surface of things, it might have been just another glade. Yet there was a vibrancy about this place which roused my senses, resembling the way a mild dose of some hallucinogen might change one's perception of things; the veil was still there, but it was twitching ever so slightly.

Some of the trees along the edge of the glade were remarkably crooked and twisted even though they grew free from the shade of the trees hedging the glade. The more I looked at these deformed and strange trees, the more they assumed the human-like shapes peculiar to many of the taboo trees. But the weirdly shaped trees in the glade did not delineate *terror loci*; rather, they were spots of allurements.

There is beauty in strangeness, I reflected as I began sketching one of the trees into my notebook. A perfect beauty – if such exists – is too often dull and will quickly cease to be interesting. Nature knows no such thing as the perfect circle and the right-angled triangle; that is the ideal of mathematicians and philosophers. The strange, on the other hand, rouses the senses because one can never tire of trying to understand it, let alone delineate it with a pencil on paper. Nature is all strangeness.

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What I tried to sketch was the strange soul of these trees. The crudely pencilled outlines made me think of hamadryads, creatures revealing themselves in hints and suggestions; shy like birds, reserved like cats, they may be glimpsed in the interplay of light and shadow, and one must patiently wait to be approached.

I made many sketches that afternoon in the glade and did not leave before I had finished the bottle of wine and the shadows began to gather.

When I got home, I was completely exhausted, my body ached, hunger gnarled, and my throat was so dry that it hurt to swallow. The regional newspaper protruded from the pillar box; in my tipsy and dazed state I pulled the paper free, glanced at the front page ... and stopped dead. My mind went blank. It was incomprehensible.

Slowly, ever so slowly, my thinking recovered. I thought that it must be a mistake. For according to the date of the newspaper, I had been gone for nearly three whole days.



Now the last remnants of sunlight glows shimmering red through the dense foliage. Tonight is Auwisnat, and time is running out. My greying hand pains terribly for every stroke of the pen. Soon it will be too late, perhaps even of

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no consequence to write this nonsense. But leafing through these pages in the dimming light, I see that I have inadvertently left something out in my race against time.

From the article in *Journal of Cryptozoological Studies*, I learned that Dr Herne was gathering forest legends in a non-disclosed region of the country. “The People of the Forest” leads off with a few general remarks concerning the traditions on elves and other creatures associated with forests. This was followed by a local myth, remarkable for its similarity to the story of the Fall in the *Torah*. The myth tells of a distant time when man lived side by side with the elves in the woods. But when a human felled a tree without seeking its consent in advance, strife broke out between the two races. In the end, man lost and was forced to leave the woods forever.

Dr Herne speculates:

Rituals go with myths, or perhaps it is rather the opposite in the sense that a myth may be viewed as the linguistic formula of the ritual. The ritual in question is performed on the aforementioned Auwisnat. Because it features a certain abandonment of Dionysian proportion, some of the old written sources confound Auwisnat with the witches' Sabbath.

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My informants have confirmed that the old traditions are still upheld. Unfortunately, it has not been possible to obtain any details concerning the content of the ritual. As it often is, people are wary of disclosing such things to a stranger. (...)

Trees play a prominent role in many legends. “No other entity is so widely and so closely tied to the destiny of humanity as the tree,” wrote Alexander Demandt. (...)

In certain parts of Sweden they speak of a guardian spirit called Skogsrået or Rådanden. Although a guardian spirit will often be invisible to the human eye, one may sense its presence by the icy uncanniness it inspires in those who happen to cross into its domain. This phenomenon, known as terror loci, is well-attested but as yet unexplained. I hope that my studies will enable me to explore this question further.

In regard to Skogsrået, it is said to be able to change shape into that of a human being, and in that shape, like its sister from Ancient Greece, the Hamadryad, it enters into sexual relations with humans. Interestingly, in some of the local traditions I have gathered, it is not the trees that shift shape but – from time to time – humans.

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The fate of Sylvestre Herne is, admittedly, obscure. I know nothing with certainty, but I suspect where he – to the extent this pronoun still applies – now resides. In his anthropological textbook, he wrote (and I quote from memory) that “field studies into supernatural ideas have led more than one anthropologist to the edge of acceptable science, and – in some sad cases – the researcher has suffered from severe states of psychopathology.”

My own “field studies” lie so far beyond any scientific theory that these pages – should anyone happen to read them – will surely be dismissed as the ramblings of a madman. And perhaps it is a kind of madness to perceive the world without the veil of consensus and preconceived ideas? Yet I feel no fear concerning my coming transfiguration; on the contrary, the rippling feeling surging through me is more akin to rapture.

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A great shadow has fallen over Europe. In this Northern country where the passage from day to night is progressively blurred by the leaden November skies, it is easy to imagine that the sun has renounced the ecliptic, leaving us to stare into the abyss of our blackening guilt.

One year ago today I could still hope against all reason that it would not come to this. A year is such a short period of time, and yet it feels like decades, a yearning and widening chasm. The hopes I nourished back then seem to me impossibly naïve now. But today is November the fifth, and across that chasm of time there is carried the sound of music, mirth, and jingling crystal glass; it is the wondrous intonation of another era, the dreamy notes of a past splendour, the sweet melody of Vienna Gloriosa as it came to live again for a few hours at the ball at Lindelund Manor.

Today I will raise my glass in memory of the Émigré Emperor.

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It was as family physician to Lord Georg Mule-Frijs and Lady Karen, a position passed on to me when my late father retired, that I was introduced to the Emperor. This was the mock title given to Franz von Goldbergsthal by certain members of our small community and later, under circumstances that might seem sad, adopted by the victim himself. When I now employ that title in reference to von Goldbergsthal, it is with a meaning diametrically opposite to the disrespect intended, indeed I cannot disassociate the old man from the Emperor he once served.

Franz von Goldbergsthal arrived at Lindelund in the beginning of April, a refugee from Austria's downfall. He was a long time friend of the family, and Baron Georg especially. They had met in Vienna in their youth in the eighteen-eighties, the two families having some distant ties of kinship (a second cousin of the Baron's grandfather had married a Goldbergsthal, I believe). The basis for their friendship was a mutual passion for the arts. Much to the old Baron's dismay, his eldest son "dabbled in paint", as he himself would later say, while Goldbergsthal, then a Cavalry Lieutenant, dreamed of becoming a playwright. At some point, however, he took up the family tradition of

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pursuing a career in the military, quickly ascending the ranks to become a General in the Austro-Hungarian Imperial and Royal Dragoons.

In his late eighties, the long-retired General cut a strikingly dignified figure. He was tall and slender, his brow was high, and he wore an impressive silver-streaked moustache which lent him a certain resemblance to Franz Josef I. He still carried himself with the officer's manner at all times, very correct, very stiff some might say. But his eyes, brown and wet, showed a kindness and compassion that softened his stiff demeanour. At times, shadows of sorrow pooled behind those brown irises, and the lines of his brow told of the hardships and losses suffered since the outbreak of the War.

But to all appearances, he was in good health.



Von Goldbergsthal would take daily walks in the countryside, often alone, sometimes accompanied by either the Baron or myself. He was, I suppose, bound to attract attention in our small community. His appearance was remarkable, he was a novelty, a German-speaking foreigner, and a Jew. I wonder if he ever overheard any of the ill whisperings behind his back, and, that being the case, if this might help explain the development of his peculiar delusion?

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Like most people at his age, the old General's conversation would more often than not turn to the past. He rarely spoke without mention of his wife and son (their only child), both of whom one felt still walked by his side. In fact, in his conversations he wove such a vivid and richly textured tapestry of life in Vienna before the outbreak of the War, that the present seemed to slink away before the listener's eyes like an embarrassed dog. The Vienna which unfolded its petals from the old man's lips bloomed with the radiance of dream, rose-tinted, yearning, and interwoven with melancholy: it was a Vienna that was no more except in memories and fantasies; a Vienna conjured with the credibility of a skilful playwright. The War was seldom touched upon, nor the loss of his son at the First Battle of the Isonzo. But the horrors he must have endured only to see his beloved Empire crumble and fall in the end was, so to speak, implied in the melancholic tenor of his reminiscences.

As much as I enjoyed listening to his tales of the Viennese balls, coffee house literati, and court life, I would sometimes feel a cold shiver when I recalled them later in the solitude of my study, or late at night in dreams. Perhaps this nervous reaction was akin to the unpleasant sensation one experiences when in the presence of a ghost. Whether

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ghosts should be acknowledged as ontological entities or dismissed as superstition matters not; the important thing is that what I experienced bears some relation to accounts of ghosts in old romances and folklore. Revenants taking their coffee at Café Central, then strolling down Ringstraße past the *nouveau riche* mansions, gathering at the salon of Josephine von Wertheimstein, or waltzing in the brightly lit marbled halls of Baroque palaces and manors ... But the unpleasant shiver was a fleeting sensation, a mere cold draft of something disturbing conjured – thus I reasoned – by my own imagination. Most likely I would not pay much attention to those instances now if not for the events of the ball.



The first symptoms of illness showed in May. The old General declined my offer of an examination, passing it off as the common cold. But when the coughing grew rapidly worse, and he finally accepted, my suspicion of pneumonia was confirmed. Informed, he merely said, “Da kann man nichts machen ...”

That idiom, a favourite of his, vexed me at first. On such occasions when someone asked him to comment upon current affairs, his reply would almost inevitably trail off

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with a *there is nothing to do about it*. In the manner of the Baron and my father, and perhaps their whole generation, von Goldbergsthal put an unconditional trust in Fate. A transcendent *raison*, however vague and obscure to human understanding, governed all events from the greatest to the smallest, and nothing was to be done about it. I thought then, as I suppose I still do, that their belief in Fate was an expression of resignation or even fatalism. And yet I cannot help feeling that we, their sceptic descendants, have lost something very essential along the way.

In any case, there really was nothing to be done. He failed to respond to the sulfonamide therapy as well as such other treatments that I dared expose him to. The infection was simply too far advanced. Although much has happened since Professor Osler's discovery, pneumonia is still *captain of the men of death*. The old General's health lay in the hands of God.

The coughing spells increased, and before long he had to take to bed for whole days complaining of fever and chest pains. In addition, he began to suffer confusion, another symptom often witnessed in cases of pneumonia in old age. He was already living much of his time in the pre-War years' Vienna; now, at shorter and shorter intervals, it happened that the mists of the past sometimes enveloped

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his faculties to a degree where the present was more or less clouded over.

In late August, his health seemed to have improved, at least the coughing and chest pains had abated to a more tolerable level. Also, noticing how his conversation was as coherent as before the periodic attacks of fever set in, I allowed myself to believe that he really was recovering from the infection. A few days afterwards, it turned out that he was still in the clutches of the dreaded disease for he had begun to refer to himself as *der Kaiser*, and nothing whatever could persuade him otherwise.

As far as I could judge, there was very little chance that he would last the year out. Informed of this, the Baron and Baroness reached a remarkable decision. Whether it was because they knew not what else to do or because they did not have the heart to contradict their old friend, I do not know. Accepting the situation without any hesitation, they decided to indulge him and instructed the servants to do likewise. "As we speak, so it is," observed Lady Karen with true aristocratic grace.

Regardless of Franz von Goldbergsthal's new status, life at Lindelund Manor went on much as before. In the role of His Imperial and Royal Apostolic Majesty, he conducted himself as amiably as ever. On such occasions when

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reality failed to conform to his delusion, he let it slide with the sublimity becoming an Emperor. Believing that he was vacationing in a foreign country, it followed that he must follow the mores of his hosts. When for example the Baroness announced that a ball would be held in his honour, he remarked that it was “a little out of season” but was pleased nonetheless.

The date of the ball was set to Saturday the fifth of November.



Built in the middle of the eighteenth century, Lindelund Manor is an impressive example of the Danish Baroque manor complex. As a child, I would sometimes accompany my father on his rounds, including visits to Lindelund Manor; later, I have been there frequently both in my medical capacity and as a friend of the House; but even after all those years, the Manor has retained some of that wondrous fairy-tale atmosphere I remember from my childhood visits.

The Baroque manor complexes have been likened to an opera. The overture consists of a miles long drive lined with tall limes which ends in the spacious courtyard. The three-winged manor house is two storeys high with yellow

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plastered brick walls. The central section echoes a white-painted temple gable with four Ionian pilasters that support a triangular tympanum above a solid tier of beams. Here, the first act of several acts begins by ascending the U-shaped entrance stairway, commencing by the stately steps of the front hall staircase to the upper storey, passing through a suite of rooms leading to the dramatic climax of the Great Hall, or the ball room. From there, the panoramic view across the sweeping grounds provides the encore.

The nation's old aristocracy is everywhere in decline, however, and the Mule-Frijs family is no exception. Lindelund Manor has certainly seen better days. The yellow plaster is cracked due to years of neglect, and the family only occupies the East Wing. Prior to the ball in honour of our Émigré Emperor, the Great Hall had been more or less unused for ten years. It is a sad state of affairs, but I mention it here not to bemoan present circumstances – *da kann man nichts machen* – but to emphasize the truly remarkable nature of the ball.



The day of the ball came with brooding skies and cold winds. On Lady Karen's request, I arrived at Lindelund early in order to be at hand in case the excitement should

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prove too much for the ailing Emperor. Apart from complaining of a slight headache, he appeared fine and was in fact in very high spirits. In consequence, I wiled away most of the hours in the library, the only quiet room in the bustling house. In the afternoon, just as the first guests arrived, the sun tore a strip in the livid cloud ceiling, enamelling the grounds with tawny tones; a good omen, I thought to myself.

Since balls went out of fashion in my childhood the ball at Lindelund was an “event” not only for me, who had never before attended one, but for several of the other guests as well. It was a mix of landed gentry, old nobility, officers, titular councillors of state, financiers, a few respected artists, town councillors, and other people of importance or money. From the prominent guests’ list, and from accounts of balls in bygone days, I had expected an extravagant display of dress. But apart from a few striking individuals, the general style of dress was disappointingly sombre, my own black tie included. Extravagance of any sort, I should have known, is not in keeping with the national character.

Among the few exceptions were the Baron and Baroness, he in a late twenties midnight blue tailcoat, and she in an amber yellow Frederick Worth gown with floral accents; together they radiated royalty. And then there was

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the guest of honour who without doubt cut the most magnificent figure of the ball. A hush fell as he showed himself in his pike-grey General's uniform with stiff collar, breeches with two red stripes, and a sabre at his hip. Tucked under the left arm, he carried a leather-visored kepi with the imperial monogram FJI on the front with a golden loop. The collar had a collar patch on the front, and around the neck he wore an elaborate medal (the Order of the Golden Fleece, I later learned). The medal and the sabre's hilt reflected the light of the crystal chandeliers.

Clad in full dress uniform, he resembled Kaiser Franz Josef more than ever. This resemblance may have assisted in creating the illusion among those present that they really were in the company of an Emperor. This was something for which I had had my fears. But observing the guests, especially those of rank, I was reminded of Lady Karen's statement: *As we speak, so it is*, for they appeared to accept the peculiar performance without question, perhaps believing that it was only a display of eccentricity. Here and there though, amusement was uttered, and even bigoted remarks about the "mad Jew" but only in low voices. All in all, my worries were put to shame, and later in the evening they evaporated completely.

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It began, I believe, after the cotillion, but I only noticed that an extraordinary change had come over Lindelund after the fact. Due to an old leg injury, I did not myself partake in the cotillion, nor in the waltzes that followed. I did not mind being a bystander though as it gave me ample opportunity to observe the festivities and listen to the music.

The large ballroom provided a dazzling setting. The wooden panels were painted to imitate marble, and in the light from the crystal chandeliers the illusion was made perfect. The raised, painted stucco ceiling gave the illusion of much greater height, and by way of large mirrors in gold frames the room appeared to expand horizontally while at the same time multiplying the numbers of guests.

At one point I remember wondering briefly about my earlier observations on dress, for surely the dancing couples were far from sombrely attired. There were men in flashing braided shell-jackets and dark uniforms with gold embroidery, and even the men in full evening dresses and black tie seemed dashing. Even more so the women, young and old, in their exquisite wide gowns of silk or satin cut low at the neck, short sleeves, and adorned with flounces and artificial

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flowers. Some wore real flowers too, and it did not at all strike me as odd that some of those flowers were out of season; I was too entranced by the elegant circling movements of the couples as they waltzed around the room with gliding steps. The music was, of course, predominated by the Strauss family, but with contributions from von Weber and Lanner too. In the beginning, the dancing couples had shown some reserve, notable also in the orchestra's performance; but after the cotillion the dance went as smoothly as the various rhythms.

Champagne flowed freely, the mood was gay, and waxing by the hour. The parquet floor was a swirling flower whorl of cloud blue, mauve, pearl white, saffron rose and chrysanthemum yellow gowns; chiffon, satin and silk swished, and shining patent-leather shoes and glittery slippers positively levitated across the floor.

I was pleasantly surprised to see the guest of honour, our émigré Emperor, frequently join in the dance though it was but for short intervals after which he would rest on a chair or mingle with the guests. Nothing in his behaviour gave me cause to worry about his precarious health, or if a dark cloud did cross my mind, it was soon dispelled by his beaming, even youthful looking countenance.

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Outside, the weather had cleared. Far away stars glimmered from a sky of rare blue, the colour of which transported me back to the Emperor's tales of Vienna and the water of Donau, and I was reminded of the famous waltz too.

*Donau so blau,
so schön und blau,
durch Tal und Au ...*

The orchestra led off the finale of the evening with the *Wiener Blut* waltz. At the centre of the dance floor, I saw the Emperor leading a mature lady in a muslin white satin gown with chiffon and mousseline de soie. Her blonde hair, chignonned with a gold clasp, had deep tones of amber that shifted with each graceful movement. The pale white hue of her skin, almost translucent like fresh milk, endowed her blue irises with a glowing intensity like lapis lazuli. She seemed to notice nothing else but her partner, and he appeared equally lost in her too. I wondered how I could have missed noticing her all evening. Other eyes were directed upon this couple too, most notably those of a young officer standing in a far corner. He had blond wavy hair and wore a fanciful uniform of the same pike-

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grey colour as the Emperor's. A kind smile played upon his lips while he gazed at the couple on the dance floor.

Something about him and the blonde woman struck me as familiar, but I could not immediately place it. As the waltz moved into its triumphant climax, I felt a weird shiver ripple through me accompanied by a slight dizziness. The whole room seemed to spin, and I was thankful when the music came to an end. In the ensuing confusion of disbanding couples, I lost sight of both the woman and the young man.

Then an unexpected encore followed. Amidst the general murmur there rose a lonely male voice singing, "Gott erhalte, Gott beschütze," and soon the whole room resounded of the Kaiserhymne.

*Gott erhalte, Gott beschütze
Unsern Kaiser, unser Land!
Mächtig durch des Glaubens Stütze,
Führt er uns mit weiser Hand!
Laßt uns seiner Väter Krone
Schirmen wider jeden Feind!
Innig bleibt mit Habsburgs Throne
Österreichs Geschick vereint!*

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With that venerable hymn, the apotheosis of Franz von Goldbergsthal to Imperial and Royal Apostolic Majesty was accentuated and completed. To this date, I am still not sure whether the hymn contained false notes, but in my ears every note rang true, however much I marvelled at it subsequently.

No doubt the nonsensical minded among those present at the ball will refer to the transmutation of that night as a fleeting dream, a trick of imagination, a delirious vision brought on by inebriation, or even a *folie à plusieurs*. Certainly that was the position taken in a short satirical piece published a few days later in a major newspaper; the author called it “the mad ball”.

Though I shall refrain from rationalizing or profaning with barren explanations what is best left as mystery, I will say this: perhaps a little madness did possess us. One day the newspapers would carry hopes for peace and decency only to crush them the next. The time was charged with anticipation of the days to come. But on that night for a few short hours we forgot all our anxieties. If it is true that we can unconsciously blind ourselves to certain unwelcome facts, is it then a pathologic symptom or a faculty of mercy?

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I am a physician of the body, and I make no claim to understand the intricacies of the human mind. But I believe all of us present had a sense that we danced on the edge of a precipice that night, though unaware of just how precariously close. That was made abundantly clear only a few days later when the reports of the Kristallnacht reached us.

But I do not wish here to speak of those atrocities, nor of those that followed in their wake. I must, however, finish my tale with a note on the day following the wondrous ball.

The dawn of the sixth of November was sultry, as sour and bitter as dawns come in the wake of nightly revels. A telephone call from Lindelund woke me early but the message cleared the fog in my head immediately.

The Emperor lay outstretched on his bed. He was still dressed in uniform, sable and kepi at his side as if he had anticipated death. This impression was furthered by his peaceful features and the fragile smile on his dry lips.

And so I raise my glass.

To the Émigré Emperor! To Europe! *Salut!*

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The advertisement was brief and to the point: “Furnished first floor room to let with kitchenette, bathroom and private entrance. Ideal for young women.”

Preparing herself for another disappointment, Nina dialled the number immediately. The phone rang many times before it was answered by a Miss Bealu. Judging by the sound of Miss Bealu’s voice and her quaint manner of speech, she was an old woman. Nina briefly described herself as a twenty-seven year old author in need of a quiet place to live.

She soon breathed a sigh of relief. Not only had she been the first to respond, her first stroke of luck in a long time, but the rent was surprisingly low. They made an appointment that very same day.

The address was located in one of the residential neighbourhoods on the fringe of the city. Most of the houses, with many villas dating back to the early twentieth century, was

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in an obvious state of neglect, and not a few looked like they were uninhabited. Further out the moors began, but the transition was gradual, blurred by shrubbery and weeds that stretched greedily towards the slowly waning summer sun.

The streets that linked the dwelling places in a haphazard pattern were broken and cracked. Small patches of garden drooped in the shade of stunted trees, and the vines grew like webs of gnarled arteries across the walls and façades. Miss Bealu's villa was no different from the melancholic surroundings.

An imposing, rusted cast iron gate led through a mouldering brick wall into a garden where despondent willows stood lamenting among lush ferns and thorny shrubbery. In the middle of this neglected waste, was a weather bitten two-storey house with five gables. It reminded Nina of the Pyncheon's house in Hawthorne's novel, only more modest: it was the kind of place where creeping shadow ever lurked over the shoulder of the sunshine, and ghosts manifested themselves as slow decay. Nina liked the villa immediately, and the neighbourhood – so far removed from the multitudinous lights and roaring masses of the inner city – was perfectly suited to her reclusive personality.

The woman who greeted her looked at least as old as the house. Miss Bealu was tall and so terribly thin that her

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wizened skin seemed to hang off of the bones. She wore a sleeveless ankle length dress that was as lacklustre as her long hair which fell like wisps of cobweb about her head. Her face was white with powder that caked at the sides of a slightly hooked nose, and her lips seemed to have been applied with pastels. Her eyes, deeply seated in their sockets, were of a nondescript colour and had a glasslike appearance.

Her lips parted in a brittle smile as she scrutinized Nina, but the look of those glassy eyes felt cold, almost callous, and Nina could not help feeling a bit intimidated. She soon convinced herself that the unpleasant stare meant nothing as it was probably caused by declining eyesight.

Miss Bealu showed Nina round the back of the house where a door communicated with a closet-size hall and a steep flight of stairs. The landlady explained that she lived alone, but it gave her “a sense of security to have a *gamine locataire* in the house.” At first the peculiar use of French phrases sounded affected to Nina, but as the old woman’s name did have a French ring to it, it might be genuine. At the top of the staircase, a door gave way to a large but extremely dusty room that was luxuriously furnished with antiques and afforded a nice view across the moors.

Once more, Nina was pleasantly surprised; she was one step short of living in the streets, and deep in debt besides,

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and could not believe her luck. And so she signed the lease without hesitation.



She moved in two days later, bringing only a suitcase with a few articles of clothing, a laptop, a couple of boxes of her unpublished short stories and some of her favourite books. Nothing else was needed. The kitchenette was sufficiently equipped if one's needs were not too demanding, and Nina had for a long time lived a frugal life out of necessity.

The whole room bore traces of age and neglect. The wallpaper had a sallow-green hue, the floorboards were dry and creaky, and cracks ran through the plastered ceiling. A massive rosewood table with worn upholstered chairs took up the centre of the room, the decoration of acanthus leaves barely visible. Placed against the wall was a large sofa with carved animal faces, snakes and twitching borders. The plush upholstery had once been red but had now faded to a pale yellow colour. Next to a baroque chest of drawers – which resembled a chubby face on lion's feet – stood an armoire with Gothic arches and thorny spires. At the other end of the room there was a rickety bookcase filled with bound volumes. Four oil paintings in gilded but peeling frames adorned the walls. Near one of the oils, a

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romantic scene of ruins in moonlight, Nina could make out the contours of a door behind the wallpaper. The most dominant piece of furniture was a mahogany poster bed with four turned beaded bedposts, a decorative panelled centre footboard and an arched headboard.

Nina quickly settled in. A minor irritant was the dust which seemed to accumulate the instant she had finished cleaning. When she was not attending her part time job as a waitress in an inner city café, she spent her days and evenings writing short stories and going for walks around the neighbourhood or on the moor. The decrepit area became a source of inspiration: it was, as she phrased it, the abode of the melancholic genius loci. She tried not to ruminate too much upon her problems and told herself that she had never felt better. Even her nightmares had abated, lingering only as vague impressions into the daytime. One recurring impression was a hazy image of Miss Bealu, but exactly what part the old woman played in these dreams remained unclear.



Except when rent was due, she rarely saw the landlady. Although waitressing paid a pittance, she felt somewhat embarrassed about the low rent, and on one occasion she even broached the subject to Miss Bealu.

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It was the month following her moving in, and Nina had been invited into what Miss Bealu referred to as the *parlour* for a cup of tea. Though it was broad daylight outside, the heavy damask curtains were drawn and a confusion of small lamps left most of the room's interior shaded in twilight. Nina was seated in an immense sofa just opposite the old woman. It seemed to Nina that Miss Bealu looked a little more hale and hearty than the day when she had first met her, but upon reflection she attributed the slight change to the effect of the semi-darkness of the parlour.

As to the question of rent, Miss Bealu replied that she did not care for money. The most important thing in life, she insisted, was life itself and youth. Besides, she added with a singular smile, she was not in want of anything that could be bought for money.

An oppressing silence followed. Nina knew not what to say, and Miss Bealu looked as if she had lapsed into deep thought. Aside from the heavy ticking of a large clock, the only sound that broke the silence was an occasional cackle from the old woman's throat.

While Nina considered a topic for conversation, she her eyes meandered around the twilight room. It was heavily furnished, almost cramped with furniture, framed paintings and objects in dull gold, tarnished bronze or dried up

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woodwork, all covered with a thin spread of dust. There was death in the air, and Nina did not envisage that her room would be let for long.

Imagining how impressive the furniture and various other objects must have been before the pall of years of neglect had fallen upon them, Nina finally broke the dense silence by complimenting Miss Bealu on the décor. The old woman nodded and began to speak in a grating voice.

“Everything in my house is heirlooms,” she explained. “Some may find the style, or lack of same, a token of *mangue de goût*, but all these pieces of furniture and divers bric-a-brac are my family. Heh! I am born here and have always lived here, the last of my lineage.”

All of a sudden Nina felt a strong sympathy toward the lonely old woman. She blushed imperceptibly and looked away. Her gaze fell on framed sepia-coloured photographs on a mantel. Miss Bealu rose with difficulty, and the echo of her creaking of old bones reverberated through the room.

“Yes,” she sighed, “it is me. Or rather *was*, heh!” Following suit, Nina rose and went across the room to take a closer look. She never would have guessed that the dazzling young woman with the dark blond hair and animated eyes was Miss Bealu. “And these are some of my former *locataires*,”

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the old woman continued, and indicated a row of more recent photographs of young women: “Mary, Edith, Ann, Catherine, Amelia and Eve – loveliest creatures all. Just like you, my dear.” She laid a withered hand on Nina’s shoulder and turned her gently towards a large mirror with a dark spotted surface.

Nina was of middle height with a Rubenesque figure – plump but not overweight – and a bit pale from lack of sun. Behind her, half drenched in soft shadows, loomed the bony shape of Miss Bealu. The contrast was almost picturesque, Nina thought, missing only the child to complete the allegory of the three ages. A sudden glint in the mirror image caught her attention. It was those glass beads eyes piercing her with their glacial stare. At once uncomfortable and mesmerized, she could not look away.

“Ah! jeunesse,” croaked Miss Bealu, her damp breath stroking Nina’s neck. “Youth, the best, the greatest gift – the Lord of Life, as Oscar Wilde put it. But sadly, so transient and vain! Heh! What I would not give to be young once more ... Does that sound terrible, my dear? No, but of course you understand.”

Nina, still gazing at the mirror reflection, responded with a polite but strained smile.

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Late in October, three months after Nina had moved in, she received her first guest. Victoria, an author of moderate success, was unlike Nina in many ways, and thus it came as no surprise that she was appalled by both the neighbourhood and the room. In her opinion it was an unhealthy place to live and the furniture was vulgar. Although Nina was too worn out from lack of sleep and long work hours, she tried her best to explain why she liked living here.

But Victoria was not easily swayed; she shook her head in an amused fashion, and exclaimed, “The old hag must have bewitched you!”

“Well, perhaps I have exaggerated her features a bit,” Nina replied, inwardly glad that she had left certain things unsaid. She would have developed her admission further if Victoria had not went on.

“You live in a sepulchre, no wonder you’re so pale!” Victoria chuckled briefly, and then continued in a more serious manner: “I know, Ninushka, I know – you’re a romantic spirit and all that, but if *I* were you I’d find some place a little less dreary ...”

It was with a certain relief that Nina saw Victoria out. She had to her own amazement found herself personally

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insulted by Victoria's critical remarks. It was as if the room and all the things in it had become part of her. Besides, she had done a good job dusting and cleaning that day, and the room really looked better.

She suddenly realized that inanimate objects – even places – can possess a soul. As with a palimpsest, she could see traces of the people who had occupied the room before her. The floor, panels and window frames all bore scratches and signs of wear; the sofa was more worn on the left side, and someone had carved an almost imperceptible heart in the headboard of the bed. But the former occupants had left more than just these visible traces; their very souls, like tears shed over a pillow, had oozed into the woodwork and the furniture.

She remembered having owned a dress once which had not been just another piece of textile but like an extension of her personality. It was thought-provoking that this dress, sold a long time ago, might still be imbued with her soul. Affection, she reasoned, gave life. But the process was not limited to the things one had loved. How many times had she stumbled over a doorstep and scolded it as if it had had a malicious intent? As soon as the pain to the toe waned – if not before – the doorstep was once again an inanimate object; but for that brief moment she had ascribed

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motivation to it. Perhaps it was the strength and permanence of emotion that gave life to otherwise dead objects?



Nina had a fondness for Gothic tales, and to her joy she had found works by Maupassant, Hoffmann and Machen on the crowded shelves of the rickety bookcase. There was also several volumes of non-fiction, mostly travel books and history. One of the books had long interested her by its alluring title: *Let the Dead Bear Witness. A Study of Ghosts and Hauntings* by one Dr Samuel Browne. Hoping that this Dr Browne might provide her with some answers, she cuddled up in the sofa with the fairly large volume. To her amusement she noticed for the first time that she had a preference for the left side of the sofa which was also the most worn.

Written in 1946, *Let the Dead Bear Witness* claimed to be a scientific work, but it neglected to mention what the author doctored in. Adopting a quote from Scott, Dr Browne led off by assuring the reader that the present study would not fall for the temptation to explain supernatural appearances as “wild vagaries of the fancy or deceptions of the optic nerves.” However, from the introduction it seemed that Dr Browne’s approach to the subject was quite conventional. Ghosts were the “residual energy” of persons who were un-

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able to find eternal rest either because they were the victims of violent crimes or the criminals themselves. In either case, they were always malignant; or at least it appeared so from the perspective of the living. For “according to ancient sources, particularly *The Odyssey*, Book XI, the undead takes sustenance from the living in order to manifest properly.” The volume contained several plates of photographs purporting to be “scientifically verified” images of the lingering residuum of undead souls. Without exception all this photographic evidence was grainy and blurred.

Nina lowered the book and scanned the room. She was definitely not alone. The ghosts were in the objects, the objects were ghosts. But, unless one tripped upon them, the objects were not evil. The furnished room was drenched with the residual energy of all the former lodgers and the dead ancestors of Miss Bealu. Perhaps this was true also of the whole neighbourhood as she had long ago intuited by naming it *the abode of the melancholic genius loci*. She felt sure there was nothing evil about it. Except for the fact that lately she had begun to suffer from lethargy, the cause of which she ascribed to an increasing sleep disorder.

It was Miss Bealu’s eyes.

She dreamt of them nearly every night. It was not exactly nightmares, but she often woke up feeling anxious.

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The eyes were the only part of those recurring dreams that she could recall – those glaring, colourless pieces of glass, always watching and haunting her. They were horrible beyond words. The image was so vivid, and the anxiety it inspired so tangible, that she began to wonder if the old landlady, who must have a spare key, actually had intruded while she slept. And then there was the hidden door ... What was on the other side? She had never been admitted any further than the parlour, and thus most of the villa was unknown to her.

Nina shook her head reproachfully, knowing full well that the wallpaper covering the door was intact. Wearily, she rose from the sofa, went into the bathroom and studied herself in the desilvered mirror. Victoria had complimented her on her figure, but she had shrugged it off as a courtesy; now she saw that she really had lost some weight.

A few days later, she called in sick. Her pale complexion was even more wan than usual, and a dim film seemed to cover her eyes. Nothing serious, she assured herself, perhaps a slight fever; she merely needed some time off. The weather was clear, and she decided to take a walk on the moor, but after she had dressed, she changed her mind. She simply felt too tired, so instead she sat for hours in front of the window facing the moor. Outside, the sun shone

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brightly from a cold blue sky, sparrow hawks circled the moor, and the silent shadows of autumn crept along the ground.

A week went by before Nina felt well enough to toil for the monthly pay check, but she was forced to return home after only a few hours. Her limbs felt so heavy that she could barely do her shopping. Not that she ate much, for she had no real appetite. Writing was out of the question, given how lethargic she felt, and reading only made her feel even more tired. She considered seeing a doctor, but it was probably just the flu or a mild depression; either way, it would eventually pass.



Blood-red and sickly green leaves fell gently to the ground, and the silkworm of the waning year spun its thread of death and decay. Nina, watching the changes from the window, worried how long she could risk staying away from work. But the turn of the season inspired her with a poignant feeling of sadness, and her diurnal worries gave way to a sense of futility.

One day, Victoria telephoned, asking if there was anything she could do. Nina, who politely declined assistance, was nevertheless forced to listen to her friend's derogatory

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remarks concerning the unhealthiness of the room and Nina's isolated existence. When Victoria urged her to move someplace else, Nina very nearly gave in. But there was something which held her back, something intangible that Victoria would never understand. She felt obliged by a sense of gratitude to Miss Bealu who, by the way, had not asked for the past month's rent, dear old soul.

Furthermore, she had developed a strong attachment to the room. But this attachment was of an ambivalent nature that she herself did not quite comprehend. She loved how the room conveyed a sense of the past: in a way it was like living in a museum except here there was a marked blurring of the distinction between past and present that almost threatened to eclipse the latter.

But it seemed to her sometimes that the room, suffused as it was with the residuum of souls, was too much alive; sometimes she even imagined that she heard voices murmuring from the objects, from the corners of the room and from behind the hidden door ...

Nina spent most of the time sleeping, and the darkening days fused with the waxing nights into a greyish haze.

In her dreams, the terrible glass eyes of Miss Bealu hovered about her relentlessly. Even in the daytime there was no escape, for though the eyes hid in the shadowy nooks and

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corners of the room, she could sense their vicious glare like a cold breath of air stroking her skin. She wondered how a nice old woman like Miss Bealu could have eyes like that? Even more inexplicable, the room appeared to be tangibly changing. Everything had become less worn. The woodwork shone, the sallow-green wallpaper was now a fresh deep green, while the surface of the mirror in the bathroom had fewer dark spots. Even the volumes on the bookcase seemed somehow to have gained their past splendour. At least she did not have to waste energy cleaning and dusting.

Finally, she decided to call a doctor. It was no easy task to drag herself out of bed, but once she reached the phone, she discovered that there was no dial tone. Remembering that she had forgotten to renew her subscription, she crawled back to bed. Before she drifted off into sleep, she could have sworn that the eyes were laughing from one of the dark corners of the room.



One afternoon she awoke to the sound of voices. At first she thought it was the incessant murmurings of the ghosts. But soon she was able to distinct words and whole phrases, and it became apparent that the voices came from the narrow hall at the end of the stairs. Also, she recognized

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that one of the voices belonged to Victoria. She wondered who the other person was.

“... funny,” she heard Victoria saying. “I thought you’d be ...”

“Yes dear?” There was something familiar about the voice, and Nina was sure that she knew her.

“Nothing,” replied Victoria. “I came to see Nina but the bell seems to be out of order.”

“I’m sorry, but Nina moved out weeks ago,” said the unknown person.

“But I’m right here,” gasped Nina, her voice barely perceptible even to herself. Desperate, she grasped one of the bedposts and dragged herself out of the bed. The effort made her dizzy, and her body fell to the floor with the muffled bump of a sack of potatoes. She was unable to stand on her feet, and the door seemed very far away.

Downstairs Victoria, obviously incredulous, enquired to Nina’s new address, but the unknown woman replied that her lodger had not provided a forwarding address:

“Hélas, it all happened so fast ... But now that the room is available,” she added, “I would be grateful if perhaps you will recommend it to your young girlfriends.”

Nina never heard the reply. She was on the verge of tears from desperation and exhaustion. She whispered:

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“But I’m right here.” With supreme effort, she managed to inch across the floor to the door. But as she reached for the door handle the sight of her arm made her freeze on the spot. Her skin was wizened and hung loose upon her bones, and the joints of her fingers were clearly visible. She tried to cry out for help once more, but the darkness of sleep was already pulling her back into its nullifying embrace.

The glass eyes shone with vitality, their glacial blue irises like halos around eclipsed moons.

“Voilà, mes chéris,” Miss Bealu chirped: “La fontaine de jeunesse! – O but she’s awake!”

Nina stared into the vitriol pools. She found it all very strange. She tried to rise, but her body did not respond to her feeble will.

“Ah! the vanity of youth,” the landlady went on. “Behold how she clings to life! Yet fear not so, my dear, you shall live on. Heh! Always you shall live with us, always. We shall take care of you, just as we took care of the others ...”

The cheerful voice of Miss Bealu became distant. A mist of shadows swirled forth, blotting out even the vicious glare of the glass-like eyes. Nina felt a chill hand from out of the shadows gently caressing her brow, closing her eyes, and all became still, lovely and black.

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It is certain that evil may attach itself to possessions, to jewellery and gems, to objects of value and objects of comparatively no worth, to pictures, to miniatures and photographs, and, almost especially perhaps, to articles of furniture.

~ Montague Summers.

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