

# Living Translators' Society

## Društvo živih prevodilaca

Editor  
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A collection of the stories written by the students  
at the Department of English Language and  
Literature, Faculty of Philosophy, University of Niš.



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*...in a soft deliberate voice, he told stories, moving his smooth brown hands above the blankets.*

*...telling the story was like labouring to walk through deep snow ...*

*"It will take a long time, but the story must be told."*

Leslie Marmon Silko, *Storyteller*

*Da, prevođenje je odista čudan zadatak i potreba, čudan problem. Istina je da je pravo umetničko delo ono jedno, i da za njega mora važiti ona božanska „Ja sam koji sam“: ... i tako se čovek zapliće sve dalje u jedan od najzanosnijih entuzijazama, u entuzijazam za jezik, i pita se: je li onda prevođenje sablazan? Je li prevod čast za pisca originala, ili je prosto parazit na lepoti njegova dela? ... prevedenih je knjiga više no originalnih ... Šta su, dakle, na kraju krajeva, ti prevodi? Jesu li to pokušaji da nam preko priprostih, slabih i trulih ćuprijica dođe genij u goste? ... U čudnom jednom ukrštanju velikih zagonetaka stoje ti vraški i preko potrebni prevodi! Kao što je ono nekada bog stvorio svet, a u tom svetu, kažu tekstovi, bilo nešto zbog čega ga je neko morao ispravljati, tako je bog – da li on – razdelio jezike da bi stvorio čudesan mnogostruki instrument čovečjeg govora i pevanja, ali, eto i u toj božanskoj ideji nesavršenstvo: da svako od nas bude nemuš pred rečju i pesmom tolikih najboljih među njima. Mit o Vavilonskoj kuli još nije dosta istumačen.*

Isidora Sekulić, *Ogledi*



# Foreword

This electronic edition is a collection of the stories written by the students at the Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Philosophy, University of Niš. They wrote the stories as part of their homework assignment in the elective academic course Gothic Imagination, taught by Milica Živković, full professor at the English Department. Each story is accompanied by its translation done by a group of students who attended the elective academic course Language Learning Exercises: Translating from English to Serbian, taught by Ljiljana Janković, assistant professor at the English Department. The idea for this project was the students' alone. The title of the publication, which was unanimously accepted, resulted from the imagination and ingenuity of one of the students, Lazar Slović, whereas the idea for the introductory poem, *At Melville's Tomb*, was provided by another equally imaginative student, Bogdan Stanković, who also translated this poem. The authors of the stories in English are: Lazar Slović, Marija Budimski, Uroš Pavlović and Dejan Pavlović. The translators of these stories are the following students: Lazar Slović, Bogdan Stanković, Dejan Pavlović, Katarina Nikolić, Petrana Kocić and Milica Milosavljević.

This publication is aimed for the university students of English who are at the advanced and proficiency level of studies, particularly for those who are determined to improve their academic skills in translating from English to Serbian, and also willing to invest their creativity, imagination and enthusiasm into their studies. All of us who participated in this project hope that it may contribute to the achievement of this goal.

## Acknowledgements

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Niš, November 2020  
Ljiljana Janković



# At Melville's Tomb

by Hart Crane

Often beneath the wave, wide from this ledge  
The dice of drowned men's bones he saw bequeath  
An embassy. Their numbers as he watched,  
Beat on the dusty shore and were obscured.

And wrecks passed without sound of bells,  
The calyx of death's bounty giving back  
A scattered chapter, livid hieroglyph,  
The portent wound in corridors of shells.

Then in the circuit calm of one vast coil,  
Its lashings charmed and malice reconciled,  
Frosted eyes there were that lifted altars;  
And silent answers crept across the stars.

Compass, quadrant and sextant contrive  
No farther tides ... High in the azure steeps  
Monody shall not wake the mariner.  
This fabulous shadow only the sea keeps.

## Kraj Melvilovog groba

Hart Krejn

Translated by Bogdan Stanković

Pod mnogim valom širokim, s ivice on  
Rasute davljenika kosti vide što  
Tvore legat. Brojne ih je gled'o, kako  
Lupaju o prašnjavi sprud, i nestaju.

I olupine behu bez zvuka zvona,  
Ta izdašna čaša smrti što vraća  
Rasuto poglavlje, modri hijeroglif,  
Sred hodnika školjki zloslutnu ranu.

A u smiraj kruga velikoga vira,  
Nalet mu se smekša i zloba uminu,  
Mrzle tu oči behu, što oltare dižu;  
A nemi odgovori puze spram zvezda.

Kompas, kvadrant i sekstant ne nalaze ni  
Jednu dalju plimu ... Vrh azurnih hridi  
Žalopojka neće prenuti mornara.  
Tu čudesnu senu samo more čuva.





# The Ghost Detective

Japan, 2nd half of the 20th century  
written by Lazar Slović

Heavy rain disturbs the peace and quiet of a night that has already been too long, Tenma Hozuki thought to himself. The precinct was relatively empty that night, just a few night shifters, and all were sound asleep. Tenma was always anxious when he saw on the scheduling board that he had been assigned the night shift, ever since he joined the force almost 15 years ago. But recently, he preferred it actually. The commotion usually present during the day reminded him of the hours spent in high school, a period he wished to forget. It was the one thing his parents and brother always nagged him about - his inability to fit in with others and make friends. This is also the reason he personally requested not be paired up, insisting the partnership would not last. His eyes were set on the full moon, the only real source of light outside his office window. Suddenly, a lightning bolt tore through the sky, somewhere in the distance. He immediately thought: "What if that lightning bolt hit someone?". An afterthought followed: "Even if it did, you can't arrest God for murder by lightning, can you?". That was the only thought he will associate with God for a while. What Tenma faces next will have very little to do with God. His office phone rang. There's been a murder. Location: Hotel Royal.

Itachi Hatake was standing on the corner of Tatsuku and Foyoto, waiting for his order. It was the usual noodle soup. But truth be told, his hunger came second to the thought that had been following him for the last three hours - when will the damn rain stop. He was wearing his black raincoat, but against rain as heavy as this, he was practically swimming. The small cover of the noodle vendor stall was actually quite welcoming all things considered. A sudden flash of lightning in the distance made him look up, as he awaited the following sound of thunder. By his calculation, the bolt hit somewhere in the western part of the city. The tallest building there was the Hotel Royal. Itachi wondered if the bolt had done any damage, since the hotel was long abandoned and there was no need for an active lightning rod. He returned to his soup, but for a moment, it happened again. A strong headache, like those he occasionally had, like someone had shot him in the head. The doctors could not provide a diagnosis, only prescriptions for the pain. It was as if he heard a voice screaming inside his head. He could barely discern it, but it was almost like: "HELP ME". As he waited for the pain to pass, he grabbed his box of pills, taking two as usual. Finally, the pain subsided. He was ready to get back to his soup, when his personal walkie-talkie picked up the police radio frequency, just like he had configured the device to do when he bought it. The message was simple: "Female body discovered, Hotel Royal". Itachi didn't even wait for the rest of the message. He hailed a passing cab. There was a hotel he needed to check out.

Modelled after French baroque architecture, with grey stone walls going up 6 stories, the Hotel Royal was quite noticeable, both during the day and night, as it stood on top of Tatsugi Hill, overlooking the Rowono river. European tourists were quite interested in staying there back when the hotel was brand new, 30 years ago, and were convinced the edifice was the work of an architect from Europe, which was not at all true. Hogoshi Hanzo, inspired by some of the architecture he had seen in Europe, designed the building, back then the most ambitious project as well as the most costly. The idea about a hotel was in the works before Hogoshi got involved, but there was

a problem. The area over Tatsugi Hill was the only possible location at the time, but had a few inhabitants who insisted on staying, claiming the area was sacred, and not to be disturbed. After 6 months of arguing and compromising, the officials forcefully removed the people from the grounds, but not before they delivered a final warning of the consequences that would take hold. All of that was ignored, and 2 years later, a magnificent hotel stood on top of the hill, beautiful and yet somehow, dreadful. To the people walking at the bottom of Tatsugi Hill and looking up, it almost seemed like a monster was sleeping above them on the plateau. Combine the structure with a stormy night such as this one and it does appear like a scene from a horror movie, Tenma thought as he stopped his car at the hotel gate, now opened for the first time in 24 years. Tenma had been a teenager when the hotel closed down, following a series of strange disappearances. Hotel guests vanished into thin air during the night, no trace, no voice. Thirty people in the span of 6 months. The police of course was very busy at the time, but absolutely nothing was found. Eventually the number of guests dropped and the hotel closed after 6 years. The grandeur of the building was such that no one bothered to volunteer to tear it down, and it stayed like that, for almost a quarter of a century. Now, it was just a shadow of the epic edifice it had once been. And what lies in the shadow? Questions and answers. But before Tenma could get a hold of the latter, he had to find out what the former were. He carried the title of detective for only a year, but he was well respected by the officers and other detectives from other precincts, and quite a few of them were standing in the lobby of the hotel, now looking like a combination of a jungle and civilization, with nature slowly winning the never-ending game of control. "What have we got in this godforsaken hole?", Tenma asked his colleagues. Yamato Onoki, senior detective from the Bulsan precinct stepped forward, shook hands with Tenma before pointing towards the stairs. Yamato was 10 years older than Tenma, and had the same amount of additional experience with him. They had worked a few cases over the years, some from Tenma's time as an officer. Becoming a detective at the age of 37 was quite an accomplishment, Yamato admitted to Tenma, on their first case where they shared jurisdiction as two detectives. They arrived on the 4<sup>th</sup> floor, Yamato pointing his finger at the door down the hall on their left, where several forensics technicians stood, slowly collecting their gear. The scene contained very little evidence, so they finished their work in 10 minutes. Yamato and Tenma waited for the last of the forensics crew to leave before entering.

They found themselves in the 4<sup>th</sup> floor saloon, each floor having its own. The body of a woman, in her mid-twenties sat in a chair in front of the TV, obviously out of order for all these years, but it seemed like she had turned it off, laughing her eyes out watching he Itachi had always been good at puzzles and mysteries, ever since he was a boy. He could see the patterns behind everything, peel away the layers until he reached the core, the truth. But he never much cared for rules or chain of command, so he decided against becoming a police officer or a forensic scientist, relying on his wits and mind to uncover what was hidden. He helped the police solve several complex crimes in the last 5 years he'd been active, all of course anonymously. The police long suspected someone was following them to crime scenes and going in

after they had already left, without them ever finding out. Knowing this, the newspapers nicknamed Itachi, "The Ghost Detective". Itachi thought it was a bit silly, but since the police never could find him or keep him away, he thought it somewhat appropriate. He had the same idea this rainy evening. The cab took him up the Tatsugi Hill, but dropped him off farther from the hotel gate, where half a dozen police cars and forensic vans now stood. He'd been a boy when the hotel was built, but he still remembered quite well where he could access the building without anyone noticing. However, he had to pass through dense foliage and jungle canopy that now dominated the site. After perhaps 10 minutes, he arrived at a wall, about 7 feet high. This was the wall covering the south swimming pool area, which meant there must be a gate nearby, a place the workers would use to approach the pipes below the pool that controlled the water going down into the Rowono river. His flashlight quickly revealed the location of the gate, some 20 feet to his right. He entered the pool area, once covered with glass windows, all of which were now broken, creating sharp shapes in the moonlight, like daggers. As he exited the pool area, he remembered the screaming voice in his head, wondering why or how this place is connected to that moment. He was sure there was a connection, he could sense it. His task was to locate the original crime scene and avoid the police, as always. He found the side staircase and started climbing. He heard voices talking on the 4<sup>th</sup> floor, meaning he located the floor the crime scene was on. But he continued on to the 5<sup>th</sup>, staying above the police. Looks like they'd only checked the other floors after finding the body, but had not searched the place thoroughly, which made sense considering the vastness of the place. He looked for an empty room with a view of the gate, so he would know when the police left. He checked the surrounding rooms quickly and chose one that suited his needs. He spent 10 minutes biding his time when he finally heard voices moving away. Just so he could keep in mind who was leading the investigation, he observed through the window who the leading detective was, only to be surprised to see two of them. The first he recognized almost immediately as Yamato Onoki, an experienced and well respected detective. The second was unknown to Itachi, a younger detective, but still a bit older than himself. He had a strange feeling as he observed him. His gut was telling him the young detective will have a part to play in whatever happens after this. Itachi carefully descended to the floor below him, quickly following the route the police had taken towards the crime scene, and arriving in a saloon. The body had been taken to the morgue for an autopsy, but Itachi always thought the crime scene's least important element was the body. The crime is told through other ways, much more complex than something as simple as a human body. Itachi noticed where and how the body had been positioned before being taken away by the coroner. The girl appears to have been sitting in front of a TV. Although he'd never seen the body, he could easily picture it with the scene in front of him and came to the conclusion this was not where she was killed, but placed there on purpose. The room had also been altered to fit the hotel's original look, which he noticed just like the detectives had. He connected the dots of the theatrical part of the murder, the room reconstruction and the positioning of the body. The TV. He touched the back panel, it was warm, meaning it had been turned on sometime during the evening, but not hot enough to fit the time when the detectives

were here. He looked around for a remote, but realized the TV most likely did not have one. He tried the large "ON" button beneath the screen. Nothing. The TV was plugged in, but the place had not had electricity for the last quarter of a century. And then it came to him. The lightning bolt. He checked the balcony closest to the saloon. A rod was placed a few meters above the window, probably configured by the murderer to draw the lightning bolt to the rod and through the wiring in the saloon, power the TV. But the amount of voltage a lightning bolt has could power the entire hotel. Which meant not everything was meant for the TV. He re-examined the saloon, from wall to wall. The wall behind the TV had a photo on it. Hogoshi Hanzo, the architect, and others involved in the making of the hotel, 30 years ago on the day of the opening. For a second, Itachi thought the photo had somehow been altered. The hotel, with its doors, windows, the position of the midday sun behind it, made it appear like a gravestone. Despite the complete renovation of the room, the photo had holes in it. He lifted the photo, revealing several light bulbs hidden in the wall itself, connected to the wires on the balcony and the rod. This was where the energy from the lightning bolt had gone as well. If only Itachi could find a way to light the bulbs again. But before that, he had a question that had been bothering him since his arrival. No sane person simply wanders around a place like this, stumbles upon the body and calls the police to report a murder. The killer had to have been the one who informed the police. But why? Itachi stopped himself for a moment. The rain had stopped. It was deathly silent. A sudden burst of wind through the windows blew past Itachi. Before he could move away from it, he fell to his knees, as another migraine hit him. This time, he did not simply hear a voice, he saw a face. Another woman. Whoever it was that was discovered tonight, was not the only victim. The killer was not done. When he composed himself, he realized his flashlight had fallen and on impact turned itself on. The light pointed towards the hallway, where a pair of feet just ran through the darkness of the hallway. Itachi knew. The killer was still here.

Tenma and Yamato left the saloon, and went back down to the lobby. The coroner came, and took the body. Based on the preliminary report, he agreed that time of death was at least half a day, if not more, but he wouldn't know for sure until the autopsy was over, around noon at the latest. Tenma and Yamato agreed to meet up at that point in time, hear the results themselves. As they were walking towards the gate, Tenma asked: "Who found the body?". "Hotonaru Mizuteki, from the Tonaka precinct, they were the closest when the tip came in." Yamato answered. "We don't know who called it in, do we?" Tenma asked. "No, anonymous." Yamato replied. Tenma was thinking about the girl. No ID on her, dressed casually, completely in black, and yet old-fashioned. It was bugging him for some reason. Something didn't add up. Why did the killer reconstruct the room? Since they won't know much about the body until noon, he was planning on going back to the office, see if he could find some files connected with the original investigations into the disappearances. It had finally stopped raining, so he pulled out a cigarette, his first in 3 hours. The officers sealed off the gate behind him, marking it as restricted and an ongoing crime scene. One by one, in the next few minutes the officers left, leaving only Tenma and Yamato. The older detective bid him farewell before driving off himself, leaving Tenma alone.

After a few minutes, he snuffed out his cigarette, going towards his car, when he was stopped by a powerful wind, making him drop his car keys. "Damn, what was that?", he shouted as he picked them up, and noticed lights on the 4<sup>th</sup> floor. Someone was still inside, and not a police officer.

Itachi quickly picked up his flash light and gave chase, down the hall of the hotel, reaching the main stairwell. The killer managed to get out of sight, but Itachi heard him go down to the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor, and ran down the stairs. His manner of investigating didn't involve chasing the perpetrator or getting into a fight with him, so he was unarmed, and after landing on the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor, he moved with caution, using his ears more than his eyes to counter the darkness he could only partially extinguish with the flashlight. The hallway of the third floor was a mess, to say the least. Plenty of nature was present here as well, plants were the lords of the hotel now. Itachi thought how incredible it is that it took only 24 years for this place to look so savage. In fact, it was quite strange for something like this to occur in only a quarter of a century. The hall looked like a piece of a large garden, except there was no sunshine, and the moon was finally blocked by the clouds that caused the storm earlier. It was pitch black. Eventually, Itachi reached the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor saloon. Out of curiosity, he checked the room. The room was an exact replica of the one he'd been to one floor above, except the room was not restored and there was no photo on the wall behind the television. As Itachi approached the window, the door of the saloon slammed shut behind him. He tried to open it, but it wouldn't budge. He was trapped. He looked for weaknesses in the walls, and determined the one on the right was his best shot at escaping. He ran across the saloon, building speed for crashing through the wall into the adjacent room. Where he was kindly greeted by the flashlight and gun of Tenma Hozuki. The two investigators stared at each other for a moment. Tenma observed Itachi closely. He was in his early thirties, with a brooding expression on his face, like he was trying to figure out the solution to a difficult problem. His black eyes appeared surprisingly kind, even in this darkness that engulfed them. There was this weird aura around him, something that gave Tenma the feeling this was not the killer. But still, he kept his gun aimed at Itachi. Itachi finally got to take a closer look at the young detective he had seen earlier with Yamato Onoki. He was certainly a bit older than Itachi, by maybe half a decade. His brown hair was still wet from the rain, and he could see Tenma's grey eyes inspecting him, trying to figure him out. Itachi thought he'd make it easier on him. "What's your name, detective?", Itachi asked. "I'm the one who should be asking that question, among other things, like arresting you for disrupting an active crime scene." replied Tenma. "Active crime scene? Finding a body is hardly a crime scene, and the killer certainly would not send an anonymous tip of the real scene of the crime. You do realize the room above us is not the original crime scene, but a stage, don't you?" Itachi responded. Tenma was astonished at what he had just heard, but only for a brief moment, after which he lowered his gun and said: "You're the Ghost Detective, am I right?". "Something tells me I can trust you. The name is Itachi Hatake. I thought you and detective Onoki had left so I took a peek upstairs." Itachi responded. "My name is Tenma Hozuki, a detective from the Ponzhu precinct. I am familiar with your work, but never thought I'd run into you like this. What got you interested in this particular case?" asked Tenma. "Let's just say, a feeling.



But you should know that I did not get trapped here on my own, someone was here, whoever killed the girl most likely. I followed him from upstairs to this floor, but lost him in the wild darkness this place has become. I tried the saloon on this floor just out of curiosity, when the door shut behind me. I tried opening it, but without success, then I looked for the weakest wall to break through and here we are now." "I didn't see anyone while I was running up here. Stayed for a smoke after Onoki left, that's when I saw your flash light. You think he's still here? Or an idea why he returned?" Tenma asked. "I didn't hear anything between the door closing and you appearing, so I'd say he's not here anymore. As to the reason he returned, there's something here that did not go according to plan. Placing the body up there was planned, as well as the room itself, but there was something else the killer had to do before that, something that involved him tipping you off and staying here. What can you tell me about the girl?" Itachi asked. "So far, she's a Jane Doe, he dressed her in old-fashioned cloths, a black suit to be precise, no obvious cause of death. The autopsy will be done by noon. Time of death ranges from half a day to two days ago." Tenma answered. "I see. Wait. Did you drive here? You have car battery charger?" Itachi asked. "I do, what do you have in mind?" Tenma replied. "I'll explain on the way." Itachi answered.

Some 20 minutes later, they were back in the saloon on the 4<sup>th</sup> floor. Since they could not recreate lightning or turn on the electricity, Itachi suggested they use the battery charger. They connected the charger to the rod set up by the killer and voila. The room was once again powered up. The light bulbs behind the photo lit up, and the holes in the photo actually pointed to several areas of the hotel. They tried the TV next, only to realize the only thing it is capable of playing after all these years is the same commercial from 24 years ago, advertising the hotel itself. They took the photo with them, marking the spots on it, and found the closest location, a small corridor near the lobby. Fighting their way through the vegetation, they uncovered a fake wall and went through it, descending several levels below the basement, into Tatsugi Hill itself. They ended up in a hidden crypt, its size identical to that of the hotel. In the largest middle part, a pile of skeletons lay. Itachi and Tenma exchanged glances. They had found the missing guests. They'd never left. Tenma noticed a table to the right, on it, a purse, and the ID of the girl from above, Mikoto Hanzo. As in the daughter of Hogoshi Hanzo, the man who had designed the building above them. Then Itachi remembered the warnings of the people who once defended this place and forbade the construction of the hotel. And thought of the face he saw during his earlier migraine. Hogoshi Hanzo had two daughters, Mikoto and Hinata. He was about to warn Tenma about the high probability of there being another murder, when he noticed a series of photos above the table, the first one being the same one from the 4<sup>th</sup> floor saloon. This one was of better quality and had no holes in it. In the photo, a face was visible to the side, a face that stood out, in the sense that it did not belong to the people who were involved in the construction of the hotel, but those who opposed it. A boy, back then around the age of 18. Since he could not stop the construction of the hotel, in the next photo, he was a security guard at the hotel, a perfect position for a man to make hidden passages that lead below the hotel, where he would go on to commit thirty murders between the ages of 23 and 24. The hotel

closed down, and he eventually joined the force in the third photo. All was making sense to Itachi, as he pointed to the pictures and Tenma quickly caught on. He could not believe what the photos were saying. The final photo, number 4, the boy had become a detective. But this was all for naught. Yamato Onoki was standing right behind them, his gun next the head of a young woman in tears, Hinata Hanzo.

"I was hoping to find the Ghost Detective only, but I guess those cigarettes were just too important to you, Tenma", said Yamato. "So, you called an anonymous tip for a murder you committed yourself, because you knew I was listening in on them and finding cases. You were worried that if I got a chance, I just might end up digging up your secrets along the way. You already solved a few cases with my help, you knew how good I was, so you had to make sure I was an easy target.", Itachi commented. "You are as good as you say you are, that's for sure. But it worked somewhat, I told the officers to clear out floors 1-4 but not above, and ignore the side stairwell because it's too damaged and could be dangerous. I heard you step a few times while you were above us, but even without the noise, I was sure you'd come." Yamato confessed. "Let the girl go, she has no part in this, if you want me!", Itachi shouted. He was looking at Tenma who was clearly not ready for a revelation like this. He didn't have a weapon, but Tenma did. But the safety of the girl was now their top priority. "NO. Hanzo and the others refused to listen when my family and I told them the area was sacred. But all they were interested in was tourist money, the deeper the pockets, the better. We had no other place to go after they chased us away, I barely got the security guard job, it was the last effort of my parents before their deaths. I vowed to deliver the punishment, and I did. First to those hideous foreigners. I took one of the dresses from 24 years ago and used it on the girl upstairs, to showcase the effects of obsession with foreign influence and money. I'm gonna go and find a pretty little white dress for this little one", he said, nodding his head towards Hinata. "Maybe after he hears about his daughters, Hanzo will beg the officials to destroy this place. But before that, Mr. Ghost Detective..." said Yamato, moving his gun towards Itachi. Before Tenma could react, Yamato turned the safety off, aimed towards Itachi and fired. The bullet went through his torso like it was made out of air. A second, a third, fourth shot, fifth, and last one. He emptied his magazine into the Ghost Detective. But the bullets hit nothing. Before Yamato could express his shock, the girl screamed, and in trying to shut her up, his grip loosened and she escaped his grasp. Tenma did not need an invitation, he pulled out his gun, safety off, and fired two shots. The boy from the photo fell to the ground, dead, in the crypt, where he would rest, forever.

It took a while, but with a bit of help from Itachi, Tenma presented the story on how he solved the case and found out about Yamato. The people accepted the story, Hanzo thanking Tenma for avenging his elder daughter and rescuing his younger one as well as promising to tear down hotel. The girl was so distraught that she could not remember what had happened correctly, and could not testify to what she had in fact witnessed. A ghost and a detective. Tenma did ask Itachi how this was possible, for him to be a ghost and yet not be.

Itachi answered "You're the detective, you tell me. I'm just a ghost."





# Fantomski detektiv

Japan, druga polovina dvadesetog veka  
Translated by the students

Teška kiša narušavala je mir i tišinu noći koja je, po mišljenju Tenme Hozukija, već trajala predugo. Te noći je policijska stanica bila relativno prazna; tek nekoliko policajaca radilo je u noćnoj smeni, i svi su bili u dubokom snu. Tenma je osećao nelagodu kadgod bi bacio pogled na tablu za raspored i video da je njemu dodeljena treća smena; ta nelagoda nije nimalo jenjavala tokom petnaest godina koliko je radio u policiji. No, u poslednje vreme mu je odgovaralo ovakvo stanje stvari. Gungula koja se obično dešavala u stanici preko dana podsećala ga je na srednju školu, razdoblje njegovog života koje nerado pamti. Naime, jedna jedina stvar koju su mu njegovi roditelji i brat stalno zamerali bila je upravo njegova nesposobnost da se uklopi i stekne prijatelje. A to je bio i razlog zbog kog je lično tražio da nema partnera na dužnosti, uporno govoreći da takva saradnja ne bi dugo potrajala. Pogled mu beše upravljen na pun mesec, jedini prirodni izvor svetlosti, koji se video sa prozora njegove kancelarije. Iznenada, negde u daljini, munja zapara nebo. Odmah mu kroz glavu prolete misao: „Šta ako je ta munja pogodila nekog?“ Odmah za njom usledi još jedna: „Čak i da jeste, ne možeš uhapsiti Boga zbog ubistva munjom, zar ne?“ Biće to jedina misao koju će u dogledno vreme povezati sa Bogom. Ono što će sledeće zadesiti Tenmu neće imati skoro nikakve veze sa Gospodom. Zazvonio mu je telefon u kancelariji. Desilo se ubistvo. Mesto: hotel Rojal.

Itači Hatake je stajao na uglu između ulica Tacuku i Fujoto, čekajući da mu se spremi jelo koje je poručio (svoju porudžbinu). Beše to uobičajena supa sa rezancima. Ali istinu govoreći, misao koja mu se vrzmala po glavi poslednja tri sata - kada će prokleta kiša da prestane - potiskivala je njegovu glad u drugi plan. Na sebi je imao crni kišni mantil, ali je, bez obzira na to, zbog jačine pljuska bio mokar do gole kože. Kada se sve uzme u obzir, zapravo mu je dobro došlo i da se malo skloni ispod nadstrešnice kod tezge prodavca nudli. On podiže pogled zbog munje koja iznenada zasvetle u daljini, iščekujući zvuk grmljavine koji je usledio. Po njegovoj računici, grom je pogodi zapadni deo grada. Najviša zgrada tamo beše hotel Rojal. Itači se zapitao da li je munja prouzrokovala neku štetu, s obzirom na to da je hotel bio odavno napušten i nije bilo potrebe da zgrada ima gromobran koji još uvek radi. Vratio se svojoj supi kada se na tren to ponovo dogodilo. Jaka glavobolja, kakva mu se povremeno javljala, i zbog koje se osećao kao da mu je neko pucao u glavu. Lekari nisu mogli da mu postave nikakvu dijagnozu, već samo da mu prepisu recepte za lekove protiv bolova. Osetio je kao da čuje neko vrištanje u svojoj glavi. Jedva da je mogao da razluči šta je glas pokušavao da kaže, ali je zvučalo kao „UPOMOĆ!“ Dok je čekao da bol umine, zgrabio je kutiju sa pilulama i uzeo dve, kao i obično. Konačno, bol je iščezao. Taman kada se spremao da ponovo prione na svoju supu, njegov lični voki-toki pokupio je radio signal sa frekvencije koju je koristila policija; Itači je podesio uređaj na ovu frekvenciju ubrzo nakon što ga je kupio. Poruka beše jednostavna: „Otkriven leš žene, hotel Rojal.“ Itači nije sačekao ni da čuje ostatak poruke. Zaustavio je taksi u prolazu. Moraće da se prijavi (da prenoći u hotelu) u hotel.

Dizajniran po uzoru na francusku baroknu arhitekturu, sa sivim kamenim zidovima koji su se protezali na šest spratova, hotel Rojal je svakako bio upadljiv, i danju i noću, uzdižući se na vrhu brda Tacugi, s pogledom na reku Rovono. Evropski turisti su hrlili da oseednu u ovom hotelu u periodu kada je bio tek sagrađen, pre trideset

godina, i bili su ubeđeni da je zgradu konstruisao neki evropski arhitekta, što nije bilo ni blizu istine. Inspirisan pojedinim građevinama koje je video u Evropi, građevinu je projektovao Hogoši Hanzo, i ovaj poduhvat bio je isto toliko ambiciozan koliko i skup. Zamisao o hotelu rodila se i pre nego što se Hogoši uključio u projekat, ali postojao je jedan problem. Oblast iznad brda Tacugi bila je jedina u kojoj je bilo moguće podići hotel, ali je u njoj živelo nekoliko stanovnika koji su insistirali na tome da ostanu, tvrdeći da je oblast sveta i da je ne treba skrnaviti. Nakon šest meseci rasprava i pokušaja da se nađe kompromis, zvaničnici su silom raselili ljude sa lokaliteta, koji su jedino uspeli da ih po poslednji put upozore na posledice koje će ih snaći. Sve njihove opomene bile su ignorisane, i nakon dve godine, na vrhu brda uzdizao se veličanstveni hotel, u isto vreme prelep i stravičan. Slučajnim prolaznicima, koji bi iz podnožja brda Tacugi posmatrali hotel, izgledao je kao čudovište koje je usnulo na zaravni iznad njih. Dok je parkirao svoj auto pored kapije hotela, otvorene po prvi put nakon dvadeset četiri godine, Tenma je prošlo kroz glavu kako je hotel, u spoju sa olujnom noći poput ove, zaista podsećao na scenu iz horor filma. Tenma je bio tinejdžer kada je hotel zatvoren, što se desilo nakon niza neobičnih nestanaka. Naime, posetioci hotela nestajali su tokom noći bez traga i glasa. Trideset ljudi u razmaku od šest meseci. Policija je, naravno, imala pune ruke posla u tom periodu, ali apsolutno ništa nije bilo otkriveno. Posle nekog vremena broj gostiju je opao, i nakon šest godina hotel je zatvoren. Zgrada je bila toliko raskošna da niko nije ponudio da je sruši, i ostala je u tom stanju skoro četvrt veka. Sada je bila tek senka nekadašnjeg velelepnog zdanja. A šta je bilo sakriveno u senci? Pitanja i odgovori. Ali pre nego što je Tenma mogao da pronađe odgovore, morao je da otkrije koja su to bila pitanja. Bio je detektiv tek godinu dana ali je uživao veliko poštovanje policajaca i detektiva iz ostalih policijskih stanica, od kojih je većina sada stajala u holu hotela, koji je sada odavao pomešani utisak džungle i civilizacije, pri čemu je priroda polako pobeđivala u toj večnoj borbi za nadmoć. „Šta imamo u ovoj rupčagi bogu iza nogu?“, upita Tenma svoje kolege. Jamato Onoki, stariji detektiv iz okruga Bulsan, istupi, rukova se sa Tenmom i potom pokaza prema stepenicama. Jamato beše deset godina stariji od Tenme; samim tim, imao je i toliko više godina iskustva u svojoj profesiji. Sarađivali su na nekolicini slučajeva tokom godina; neki od njih bili su u periodu kada je Tenma još uvek bio policajac. Tokom saradnje na prvom slučaju na kome su obojica radili kao detektivi, Jamato je odao priznanje Tenmi da je to što je postao detektiv sa trideset sedam godina zaista veliki uspeh. Nakon što su se popeli na četvrti sprat, Jamato je prstom pokazao na vrata koja su se nalazila niz hodnik sa njihove leve strane, gde je nekoliko forenzičara stajalo i polako prikupljalo svoju opremu. Na mestu zločina nalazilo se malo dokaza, tako da su svoj posao završili za deset minuta. Jamato i Tenma sačekashe da svi forenzičari odu i tek onda uđoše. Obreli su se u salonu na četvrtom spratu; u hotelu je svaki sprat imao zaseban salon. Telo žene, starosti oko dvadeset pet godina, beše posađeno u stolicu ispred televizora, koji je očevidno bio u kvaru godinama, no izgledalo je kao da tek što ga beše ugasila, smejući se od srca dok gleda svoju omiljenu seriju. Bila je bleđa i hladna kao led, što je značilo da je bila mrtva makar pola dana, a najviše dva. Dve misli ponikoše u umovima dvojice detektiva: prva beše vezana za uzrok smrti, jer na telu nije bilo ničega što bi ukazalo na način na koji je devojkica umrla. A druga? Zašto je, za Boga miloga, ova soba izgledala kao da

su je upravo dekorisali za neku proslavu, a ne oronulo kao ostatak ovog mesta nakon dvadeset četiri godine propadanja?

Itaćiju je još od detinjstva dobro išlo rešavanje zagonetki i misterija. Mogao je da uoči šablone i preklapanja u svemu, da skida jedan po jedan sloj tajni dok ne dođe do suštine, do istine. Ali nikada nije previše mario za pravila ili za lanac komandovanja (nadređene), tako da je odlučio da ne postane policajac ili forenzičar i rešio da upotrebi sve svoje mentalne sposobnosti kako bi otkrio ono što je sakriveno. Za poslednjih pet godina, koliko je bio aktivan, pomogao je policiji da reši nekoliko zamršenih slučajeva – potpuno anonimno, razume se. Policija je već duže vreme sumnjala da ih neko u stopu prati do mesta zločina a potom ta mesta istražuje nakon što oni napuste poprište događaja, ali nikad nisu uspeli da otkriju ko je to bio. Saznavši sa ovo, novinari su Itaćiju nadenuli nadimak „fantomski detektiv.” Itaći je mislio da je taj pseudonim pomalo smešan; no, s obzirom na to da policija nikad nije uspela da ga otkrije niti drži podalje od mesta zločina, opet je smatrao da je to ime nekako prikladno. Ova misao mu ponovo pade na pamet te kišne večeri. Taksu ga je odveo do brda Tacugi, ali ga je ostavio nešto dalje od kapije hotela, gde je već pet-šest vozila bilo parkirano, što policijskih automobila, što forenzičkih kombija. Bio je tek dečak kada je hotel napravljen, ali se i dalje odlično sećao gde je mogao da uđe u zgradu a da ga niko ne primeti. No morao je da se prvo probije kroz gusto olistalo granje i rastinje koje je podsećalo na džunglu, a koje je sada gospodarilo celim predelom. Nakon nekih desetak minuta, probio se do zida visokog preko dva metra. Taj zid je ograđivao južni odeljak hotela sa bazenom, što je značilo da u blizini mora postojati neka kapija, neko mesto koje su radnici koristili za pristup cevima ispod bazena koje su sprovodile vodu naniže u reku Rovono. Pomoću baterijske lampe brzo je otkrio gde se ta kapija nalazi - bila je na nekih pet, šest metara sa njegove desne strane. Ušao je u odeljak sa bazenom, koji nekad beše pokriven staklenim prozorima; svi ti prozori sada behu slomljeni, praveći na svetlosti mesečine oblike oštre poput bođeža. Dok je izlazio iz ovog odeljka, prisetio se vrištanja u glavi, i zapitao se kako je i zašto ono bilo povezano sa ovim mestom. Bio je siguran da tu postoji neka veza; mogao je da nasluti tako nešto. Trebalo je locirati pravo mesto zločina i, kao i uvek, izbeći policiju. Naiđe na bočno stepenište, te se stade penjati uz njega. Do njega dopreše glasovi sa četvrtog sprata; uto on shvati gde se nalazilo mesto zločina. Međutim, produži do petog sprata, ostavivši policiju sprat niže. Delovalo mu je kao da su obišli sve spratove nakon što su otkrili telo ali da nisu detaljno pretražili hotel, što je imalo smisla s obzirom na njegovu veličinu. Potražio je praznu sobu sa pogledom na kapiju kako bi odmah uočio trenutak kad ode policija. Brzo je obišao okolne sobe, te izabra jednu koja mu je najviše odgovarala. Čekao je deset minuta dok nije konačno primetio da se glasovi udaljavaju. Kako bi saznao ko vodi istragu, baci pogled kroz prozor da vidi ko je glavni detektiv; iznenadi se spazivši dvojicu njih. Prvog je prepoznao maltene odmah; bio je to iskusni i vrlo cenjeni detektiv Jamato Onoki. Drugi mu je bio nepoznat; taj detektiv je delovao mladoliko, ali svakako malo starije od Itaćija. Čudno se osetio gledajući ga. Nešto mu je govorilo da će ovaj mladi detektiv odigrati neku važnu ulogu u onome što se nadalje bude dešavalo. Itaći se pažljivo spustio na sprat ispod; brzo se uputio hodnikom kojim je policija stigla do poprišta zločina i

stigao do salona. Policija je odnela telo u mrtvačnicu na obdukciju, ali je Itaći oduvek verovao da je telo najmanje važan deo mesta zločina. Postoje brojne metode kojima se može otkriti priroda zločina, metode mnogo složenije od nečeg tako jednostavnog kao što je ljudsko telo. Itaći je uočio gde i u kom položaju se telo nalazilo pre no što ga je mrtvozornik sklonio. Po svemu sudeći, devojka je sedela ispred televizora. Iako nije stigao da vidi telo, mogao je bez problema da ga zamisli kao deo prizora koji je sada posmatrao, te je došao do zaključka da devojka nije ovde ubijena, već je tu bila smeštena s namerom. Primetio je i da je soba bila uređena kao u vreme otvaranja hotela, što behu uočili i detektivi pre njega. Sve stavke koje je zapazio - teatralna priroda ubistva, rekonstrukcija izgleda sobe, položaj tela - bile su delovi slagalice koja se polako sklapala. Televizor: Pipnuo je zadnju ploču; bila je topla, što je značilo da je uređaj bio uključen tokom večeri, ali nije bila toliko topla da sugerise na vreme tokom kojeg su detektivi bili prisutni. Potražio je daljinski, ali je shvatio da ga televizor verovatno nije ni imao. Stisnuo je veliko dugme ispod ekrana na kom je pisalo „Uključi.“ Ništa. Televizor je bio priključen, ali hotel nije imao struju poslednjih četvrt veka. I onda mu je sinulo. Munja. Proverio je terasu najbližu salonu. Gromobran je bio zakačen par metara iznad prozora; verovatno ga je ubica podesio da privuče munju kako bi kroz električne instalacije u salonu pokrenuo televizor. Ali je strujni napon munje toliki da bi mogao da napaja ceo hotel. Što je značilo da sva ta struja nije bila namenjena samo da bi se televizor upalio. Ponovo je pregledao ceo salon, od zida do zida. Na zidu iza televizora bila je okačena fotografija. Na njoj su bili Hogoši Hanzo, projektant hotela, i ostali koji su učestvovali u izgradnji, uslikani pre trideset godina, na dan otvaranja. Itaćiju se na trenutak učini da je fotografija nekako izmenjena. Položaj podnevnog sunca iza hotela stvarao je osećaj da Rojal, sa svim svojim vratima i prozorima, na slici izgleda kao nadgrobni spomenik. Kao sušta suprotnost sobi koja je bila potpuno renovirana, fotografija je bila izbušena na nekoliko mesta. On podiže fotografiju; ispod nje se u samom zidu ukaza nekoliko sakrivenih sijalica povezanih sa žicama na terasi kao i sa gromobranom. Znači, i za ovo je bilo potrebno napajanje iz munje. Kada bi Itaći samo našao način na ponovo upali sijalice. Ali pre toga, još od trenutka kada je ovde stigao, po glavi mu se vrzmalo jedno pitanje koje ga je kopkalo. Nijedna razumna osoba ne bi se vrzmala po ovakvom mestu, naišla na telo, i potom pozvala policiju da prijavi ubistvo. Ubica je morao da bude taj koji je obavestio policiju. Ali zašto? Itaći se prenu na trenutak. Kiša beše stala. Bilo je tiho kao na groblju. Naglo zalupaše prozori od naleta vetra koji potom produva pored Itaćija. Pre nego što je uspeo da se skloni od vetra, on pade na kolena, pogođen još jednom migrenom. Ovoga puta nije samo čuo glas; video je i lice. Još jednu ženu. Čiji god leš da su otkrili večeras, nije bio jedina žrtva. Ubica nije bio gotov. Kada je došao sebi, shvatio je da mu je baterijska lampa pala i uključila se pri udaru o pod. Svetlost lampe beše uperena ka hodniku, pa tom prilikom osvetli nečije noge koje tek što zamakoše u tamu hodnika. Itaći je sada bio siguran - ubica je i dalje bio tu.

Tenma i Jamato napustiše salon i vratili se u hol. Mrtvozornik je došao i odneo telo. Prema preliminarnom izveštaju, utvrdio je da je vreme smrti nastupilo najmanje pola dana ranije, ako ne i više, ali neće znati sa sigurnošću dok obdukcija ne bude obavljena, što bi bilo najkasnije do podneva. Tenma i Jamato se dogovoriše da se

nađu otprilike u to vreme kako bi lično čuli rezultate. Dok su išli ka kapiji, Tenma upita: „Ko je otkrio telo?” „Hotonaru Mizuteki, iz okruga Tonaka, bili su najbliži lokaciji kad je stigla dojava,” odgovori Jamato. „Ne znamo ko je zvao, zar ne?” upita Tenma. „Ne, anonimna poziv,” reče mu Jamato. Tenma je razmišljao o devojci. Nije imala nikakva dokumenta kod sebe; bila je odevena neformalno, skroz u crno, ali opet staromodno. Smetalo mu je to iz nekog razloga. Nešto se tu nije slagalo. Zašto je ubica rekonstruisao izgled sobe? Pošto se ispostavilo da neće saznati puno toga o telu do podneva, planirao je da se vrati u kancelariju, kako bi potražio neke dosijee vezane za prvobitnu istragu o nestancima. Konačno je prestala kiša te on pripali cigaretu, prvu u poslednja tri sata. Policajci zapečatiše kapiju iza njega, postavivši oznake da je tu zabranjen pristup i da je ispitivanje mesta zločina u toku. Potom, jedan po jedan, napustiše Tenmu i Jamata. Stariji detektiv se pozdravi pa i sam sede u kola i odveze se, ostavivši Tenmu samog. Nakon nekoliko minuta, Tenma ugasi cigaretu i krenu prema svom autu kada ga preseče jak nalet vetra od kojeg mu ispadoše ključevi iz ruke. „Dođavola, šta to bi?” uzviknu dok ih je podizao sa zemlje i uto primeti svetlo na četvrtom spratu. Neko je i dalje bio unutra, a taj neko nije bio policajac.

Itači brzo podiže baterijsku lampu i daje se u trk niz hodnik hotela dok nije stigao do glavnog stepeništa. Ubica je uspeo da mu pobegne iz vidokruga, ali ga je Itači čuo kako se spušta na treći sprat, te potrča niz stepenice. Metod koji je koristio u istraživanju nije podrazumevao ni poteru za vinovnikom zločina niti borbu prsa u prsa s njim, tako da nije bio naoružan, i nakon što se spustio do trećeg sprata, nastavio je oprezno, pritom više koristeći svoj sluh negoli vid kako bi se izborio sa tamom koju je tek delimično uspevao da pobedi pomoću svoje baterijske lampe. Hodnik na trećem spratu bio je, u najmanju ruku, u haosu. Umnogome je priroda i ovde zavlada; sada je flora carovala u hotelu. Itačiju je palo na pamet kako je neverovatno da su bile potrebne samo dvadeset četiri godine da ovo mesto poprimi izgled prave divljine. Zapravo, bilo je jako neobično da se ovako nešto dogodi za svega četvrt veka. Hodnik je izgledao kao deo kakve velike bašte, s tim što ne beše sunca, a mesečinu behu zaklonili oblaci koji pre toga donesoše oluju. Vladao je mrkli mrak. Najzad, Itači stiže do salona na trećem spratu. On pregleda sobu iz čiste znatiželje. Prostorija je bila verna replika one koja se nalazila sprat iznad, s tom razlikom što nije bila restaurirana, i nije bilo fotografije na zidu iznad televizora. Kako se Itači približio prozoru, vrata salona iza njega se zatvoriše sa treskom. Probao je da ih otvori, ali se nisu ni pomakla. Bio je u klopci. On potraži slabe tačke po zidovima, te otkri da je onaj s njegove desne strane bio njegova najbolja šansa da pobegne. Potrčao je preko prostorije, dobivši pritom na ubrzanju koje mu je bilo neophodno da probije zid i nađe se u susednoj sobi. A tamo su ga ljubazno dočekali baterijska lampa i pištolj Tenme Hozukija.

Dva istražitelja se zagledaše jedan u drugog na trenutak. Tenma pažljivo osmotri Itačija. Delovalo je kao da je u ranim tridesetim godinama, duboko zamišljen, kao da je pokušavao da otkrije rešenje nekog teškog problema. Njegove crne oči izgledale su iznenađujuće nežno, čak i usred te tame kojom su bili okruženi. Imao je tu neku čudnu auru oko sebe, nešto što je Tenmi odavalo utisak da on nije ubica. No i pored toga, i dalje je držao Itačija na nišanu. Itači je konačno uspeo da izbliza vidi mladog detektiva kojeg je ranije spazio sa Jamatom Onokijem. Svakako je bio malo stariji od



Itaćija, možda nekih pet godina. Njegova smeđa kosa bila je i dalje vlažna od kiše, i mogao je da primeti kako ga Tenma promatra svojim sivim očima, pokušavajući da pronikne u njegove misli. Itaći pomisli kako bi mogao da mu malo olakša posao. „Kako se zoveš, detektive?” upita Itaći. „Ja sam taj koji bi trebalo da postavi to pitanje, a između ostalog, trebalo bi i da te uhapsim zbog remećenja mesta zločina koje je pod istragom,” odgovori Tenma. „Mesta zločina pod istragom? To što ste ovde našli telo ne znači da je ovo i pravo mesto zločina, a ubica svakako ne bi poslao anonimnu dojavu kojom prijavljuje pravo poprište zločina. Nadam se da shvataš da prostorija iznad nas nije mesto gde se zločin zaista odigrao, već obična dimna zavesa,” odgovori mu Itaći. Tenma je bio zapanjen onim što je upravo čuo, ali samo na tren; potom je spustio pištolj i upitao: „Ti si fantomski detektiv, zar ne?” „Nešto mi govori da mogu da ti verujem. Zovem se Itaći Hatake. Mislio sam da ste detektiv Onoki i ti otišli, pa sam bacio pogled gore,” odgovori mu Itaći. „Ja sam Tenma Hozuki, detektiv iz okruga Ponžu. Tvoja dela su mi poznata, ali nikad mi nije bilo ni na kraj pameti da ću ovako naleteti na tebe. Zašto ti je baš ovaj slučaj privukao pažnju?” upita Tenma. „Recimo samo da je to bio neki osećaj. Ali trebalo bi da znaš da nisam sam sebe zarobio ovde; neko je bio ovde, a po svemu sudeći upravo onaj koji je ubio devojkicu. Sledio sam ga odozgo do ovog sprata, ali sam ga izgubio u ovoj podivljaloj tami koja se uvukla u ovo mesto. Iz čiste radoznalosti sam ušao u salon na ovom spratu, i u tom trenutku su se vrata iza mene zatvorila. Probao sam da ih otvorim, ali bezuspešno; onda sam potražio zid koji je najlakše mogao da popusti kako bih ga probio, i eto nas sad ovde.” „Nikog nisam video usput dok sam trčao ovamo. Ostao sam da ispušim cigaretu nakon što je Onoki otišao i tada sam ugledao svetlo iz tvoje baterijske lampe. Misliš li da je i dalje tu? Ili imaš ideju zašto se vratio?” upita Tenma. „Nisam čuo ništa od trenutka kada su se vrata zatvorila do trenutka kada si se pojavio, tako da mislim da nije više ovde. A što se tiče razloga zbog kog se vratio, ima nečeg ovde što mu nije krenulo po planu. Planirao je da gore smesti telo, kao i da uredi sobu, ali postoji nešto što je ubica morao da učini pre toga, nešto što je podrazumevalo da vam se javi anonimno a potom ostane ovde. Šta možeš da mi kažeš o devojkici?” upita Itaći. „Za sada znam da je N.N. lice, da ju je obukao u staromodnu odeću, odnosno, da budem precizniji, crnu svečanu odeću, i da uzrok smrti nije očigledan. Završiće obdukciju do podneva. Vreme smrti je u opsegu od pre dva dana do pre pola dana,” odgovori Tenma. „Shvatam. Čekaj malo. Da li si došao ovde kolima? Imaš li punjač za akumulator?” upita Itaći. „Imam, šta ti je palo na pamet?” upita Tenma. „Objasniću ti usput,” glasio je Itaćijev odgovor.

Nakon nekih dvadeset minuta, ponovo su bili u salonu na četvrtom spratu. Pošto nisu mogli ponovo da stvore munju, niti da uključe struju, Itaći je predložio da uključe punjač za akumulator. Povezali su punjač sa gromobranom koji je ubica postavio, i gle! Soba je ponovo bila osvetljena. Sijalice iza fotografije su se upalile dok su rupe u fotografiji zapravo ukazivale na određene delove hotela. Potom su isprobali televizor, tek onda shvativši da je jedino što je ovaj uređaj mogao da reprodukuje nakon svih ovih godina bila jedna te ista reklama, stara dvadeset četiri godine, koja je reklamirala sam hotel. Poneli su fotografiju sa sobom, prethodno označivši delove hotela na njoj, i potom našli njima najbliži deo sa slike – mali hodnik blizu hola. Nakon što

su prošli kroz rastinje, otkrili su lažan zid i probili ga, a zatim su se spustili nekoliko nivoa ispod podruma, zašavši u samo brdo Tacugi. Obreli su se u skrivenoj grobnici koja je bila velika koliko i sam hotel. U njenom najvećem delu, na sredini, ležala je gomila kostura. Itači i Tenma se pogledaše. Otkrili su goste koji su nestali, ali koji zapravo nikad nisu ni otišli odatle. Tenma je sa svoje strane primetio sto, a na njemu tašnu, kao i legitimaciju devojke koja je pronađena, Mikoto Hanzo. Drugim rečima, stvari ćerke Hogošija Hanza, čoveka koji je projektovao zgradu iznad njih. Potom Itačiju padoše na pamet upozorenja ljudi koji su nekada štitili ovo mesto i branili izgradnju hotela. I setio se lica koje je video tokom svoje poslednje migrene. Hogoši Hanzo imao je dve ćerke, Mikoto i Hanatu. Dok se nosio mišlju da upozori Tenmu da će se vrlo verovatno dogoditi još jedno ubistvo, ugledao je niz fotografija iznad stola; prva beše ista kao ona u salonu na četvrtom spratu. Ova je pak bila boljeg kvaliteta i nije bila izbušena. Na fotografiji, sa strane, isticalo se jedno lice vidno drugačije od ljudi uključenih u rad na hotelu; bilo je to lice čoveka koji se bori protiv izgradnje. Momak, oko 18 godina starosti. Kako nije uspeo da zaustavi izgradnju hotela, na sledećoj fotografiji prikazan je kao radnik obezbeđenja u hotelu, što je bilo pogodno radno mesto za čoveka koji u planu ima prokopavanje skrivenih prolaza ispod hotela, a u kojima će, od svoje dvadeset treće do svoje dvadeset četvrte godine, počinuti trideset ubistava. Hotel se zatvorio i, kako je posvedočila treća fotografija, mladić se pridružio policiji. Itačiju je sve to imalo smisla, a nakon što je uputio Tenmu na fotografije, i drugi detektiv je to brzo shvatio. Nije mogao da veruje šta vidi na njima. Na četvrtoj i poslednjoj slici, momak je postao detektiv. Ali sva njihova razmišljanja bila su uzaludna. Jamato Onoki je stajao tik iza njih i držao pištolj prislonjen na glavu mlade žene, Hinate Hanzo, koja je bila u suzama.

„Nadao sam se da ću naići samo na fantomskog detektiva, ali biće da prosto nisi mogao da izdržiš bez cigarete, Tenma,” reče Jamato. „Znači, ti si anonimno prijavio ubistvo koje si sam počinio zato što si znao da obraćam pažnju na ovakve stvari i nalazim ovakve slučajeve. Brinuo si se da li ću, ukoliko budem imao prilike, da pritom razotkrijem tvoje tajne. Već si rešio nekoliko slučajeva uz moju pomoć, tako da si znao koliko sam dobar, pa si morao da se postaraš da budem laka meta,” primeti Itači. „Dobar si baš kao što kažeš, to je sigurno. Ali mi je pošlo za rukom donekle: rekao sam policajcima da pregledaju prva četiri sprata i da se ne penju iznad, kao i da zanemare bočno stepenište zato što je previše oronulo pa bi moglo biti opasno. Nekoliko puta sam čuo tvoje korake dok si bio iznad nas, ali čak i ako zanemarim to, znao sam da ćeš doći,” priznao je Jamato. „Pusti devojku – ona nema veze sa ovim, ako sam ja taj koga želiš!” viknu Itači. Gledao je u Tenmu, koji očigledno nije bio pripremljen za ovakvo otkriće. Itači možda nije imao oružje, ali Tenma jeste. Ali sada im je glavni prioritet bio da spasu devojku. „NE! Hanzo i ostali nisu hteli ni da čuju kada smo im moja porodica i ja govorili da je oblast sveta. Sve što ih je zanimalo bio je novac turista; što veća zarada, to bolje. Nismo imali gde da odemo nakon što su nas oterali. Jedva sam uspeo da dobijem posao kao radnik obezbeđenja, i to je bilo poslednje što su moji roditelji uspeali da urade pre nego što su umrli; zakleo sam se da ću kazniti sve one koji su to zaslužili. I to sam i učinio – pre svega one gnusne strance. Uzeo sam haljinu staru dvadeset četiri godine i obukao je onoj devojci gore na spr-



tu; hteo sam da pokažem kakve posledice može da izazove opsesivnost inostranim uticajem i novcem. A sada ću da odem i potražim lepu belu haljinicu za ovu malu," reče Jamato i glavom pokaza na Hinatu. „Možda će Hinato preklinjati zvaničnike da unište ovo mesto kada bude čuo šta se desilo njegovim ćerkama. Ali pre toga, gospodine fantomski detektive," reče i uperi pištolj ka Itačiju. Pre nego što je Tenma stigao da reaguje, Jamato je otkočio pištolj, naciljao Itačija i opalio. Metak je Itačiju prošao kroz grudi kao kroz vazduh. Usledili su drugi, treći, četvrti, i poslednji, peti hitac. Jamato je ispraznio svoj šaržer u fantomskog detektiva. Ali meci ne pogodiše ništa. Pre nego što je Jamato uspeo da iskaže svoje zaprepašćenje, devojka je vrisnula, i dok je pokušavao da je učutka, ona mu se istrže iz ruku. Tenmi nije trebalo puno da reaguje; izvukao je svoj pištolj, otkočio ga, i ispalio dvaput. Nekadašnji mladić sa fotografije pade mrtav; tu u grobnici, u kojoj će počivati večno.

Trebalo je malo ubeđivanja, ali uz malo Itačijeve pomoći, Tenma je izneo priču o tome kako je rešio slučaj i razotkrio Jamata. Ljudi su prihvatili priču; Hanzo se zahvalio Tenmi što je osvetio njegovu stariju a spasio mlađu ćerku, a obećao je i da će srušiti hotel. Devojka je bila toliko uznemirena da se nije dobro sećala onoga što se dogodilo, te nije mogla da svedoči o onome čemu je zapravo prisustvovala. Fantom i detektiv. Tenma je ipak upitao Itačija kako je moguće da on u isto vreme i bude i ne bude fantom.

Itačijev odgovor je glasio: „Ti si detektiv; ti meni kaži. Ja sam samo fantom.”

# Ripples

At first, there was nothing out of the ordinary  
with her reflection.

written by Marija Budimski

The mirror stood mounted on the wall in the same spot it had always occupied, above the washbasin in the bathroom. It had stood in that spot ever since it had been brought into the house by a lovely young woman, her reflection black of hair and blue-eyed and smiling. The tiles around it had changed from white to a light, almost mossy green; the stickers on the cool surface of the mirror had started fading, then slowly peeled off, and were replaced with others; the washbasin broke one afternoon, and in its place another, newer one, was installed; the bathtub had seen better days, old and worn as it was, and it too was ushered out of the cramped bathroom to make way for a newer model. The bathroom changed around the mirror, but the mirror remained. It saw the faces of three generations of the family reflected in it as they went about washing their hands and their teeth, and combing their hair. It heard three generations' worth of secrets, fears, sorrow and frustration. Yet they too, one by one, aged and left, never to return, and were replaced by others. But the mirror's shine never faded, and the polish of its ornate frame never frayed or chipped. The mirror endured, largely undisturbed.

Then the walls began to creak, plaster began to chip and crumble to the tiled floor, and the wooden beams began to snap under the weight of the attic and the roof. The old house could bear no more passage of time. So the mirror was taken from its resting place on the wall and transported to the shed which stood strong and new in the depths of the garden, flowers and grass and spring green leaves reflecting on its surface as it was carried there. In the shed it remained, undisturbed, facing one of the windows and watching the workers that came and went with the sun. And when the sun set one day, and rose on the next, and the workers did not return, the mirror patiently waited to be brought back to where it had stood before. The sun rose and set, the moon waxed and waned, rains pounded on the windows, snow blanketed the garden and then melted and the garden bloomed anew, but no one ever came into the shed. There the mirror remained, undisturbed, and something in it broke.

And yet there came a time when the mirror was discovered again. Though its polish had long gone and the paint beneath it had chipped from the cold and the damp of the shed, its surface was glossy still, in spite of the thin layer of dust covering every other object in the small building in the wild garden. It was carried back to the house gently, as if it were such a fragile little thing, and the mirror noted that the house barely resembled the one it had been taken from all those years ago. When that had happened, the mirror did not know, for it had stopped watching the house after that first spring.

It was cleaned and mounted at an angle, high on one of the walls of the family room, opposite a great window overlooking the green of the garden and the asphodel that bloomed there. The shed, too, could be seen from the window, and the mirror chafed at having to face the bitterness of that sight. Still, faces would be reflected in it once more, and happiness, and excitement, and that was a somewhat comforting notion. Thus, the mirror sat there, waiting, waiting, waiting. But the family rarely ever came near the mantel above which the mirror sat, choosing instead to congregate around the couch at the far end of the room. When one of them did come near, the mirror

saw only the top of a head, and the asphodel swaying in the wind in the distance. They stayed but a fleeting moment, and then they were gone, and the mirror was again left to brew in its solitude. It recalled more than once a bright set of blue eyes above a smiling mouth.

Autumn winds blew, snows fell and melted, rains brought the green back to life, and the mirror was left on the wall, undisturbed. The paint of its frame cracked further and began peeling, and finally, finally the family turned their attention to the mirror, remarking what a shame it was that it had become so shabby. The mirror bristled at the insult, but had little time to reflect on it before it was taken down the next day in the early hours of the morning. Panic settled in, for the mirror did not want to return to the shed, wanted desperately to stay mounted on the wall in the family room even if it meant the family never sparing it a glance.

But gentle hands settled it onto a table in a room filled with tools, a room the mirror had never seen before, and then those hands were gentle with it no more. The frame was scraped and scraped and scraped until it felt as though there would be none of it left, until it was burning and raw, and then a cooling red liquid was smeared over it, and it felt like heaven for a few moments, before it too began to burn as it dried. Another sort of liquid, clear this time, followed, and the fumes it let out as it dried pressed down on the surface of the mirror, enveloping it so completely it seemed there was no air left to breathe. Then, the mirror saw no more.

But when the fumes cleared, it found that it again rested against a wall. The air was clearer here, though the stench of the liquids smeared on the mirror lingered somewhat around it, and the red of the tiles in the bathroom served only as a reminder of the horror those formerly gentle hands had inflicted. The mirror shook with anger and trembled with fear, and not even the fact that it once more had faces to reflect consoled the poor thing. The gentle hands that had so hurt it belonged to a woman, and her face was always smiling, her brown eyes always danced with mirth, and her blonde hair always shone so bright that it hurt to look at it. It was unfair, the mirror thought, that it should be faced with the sight of her so often, the sight of her who had brought it naught but pain and misery.

At first, there was nothing out of the ordinary with her reflection. But then again, at first, there had been nothing out of the ordinary with the mirror either.

The walls began to creak and the plaster began to chip and crumble to the tiled floor and the wooden beams began to groan with the weight of the attic and the roof. Curiously, the creaking never left the bathroom, and the plaster didn't chip and crumble anywhere else in the house, and no other wooden beams groaned. Each day, the creaking got louder, each day more plaster would come off the wall and fall apart into tiny pieces once it hit the tiles, sounding like needles scraping the surface of metal, and each day the groaning echoed more and more. The sounds would keep her awake at night, trembling in her bed, unable to shut her eyes for fear of something coming for her in the night. Then the groans turned to gasps, and the gasps became wails, and then, finally, the wails stopped. For a while, the wood was silent,

and the woman spent a few peaceful nights in her bed beside her husband, who never seemed to hear a thing, but the stench of paint fumes filled the bathroom one day and the wooden beams choked on them, the gurgling terrifying to hear.

At first, there was nothing out of the ordinary with her reflection. And then it began to change.

She would not spend more time in the bathroom than was necessary, for the sounds were loudest there, and the fumes lingered in the air no matter how long the windows stayed open. In there, she felt as though a pair of eyes always watched her, followed her every move from somewhere behind the tiles covering the creaking walls, and her stomach would tie itself into knots and dread would settle, heavy, in her limbs, a voice in her head telling her to run, run, *run* as fast as she could.

She avoided the mirror too, not wanting to see the bags under her eyes that had undoubtedly formed from the lack of sleep, not wanting to see the shine gone from her hair and the twinkle gone from her eyes.

The mirror did not like that. So it, too, began to change. The glossy new coat of red paint cracked and began to peel, but instead of the white surface that rested beneath the paint, the spaces between the cracks seemed redder than the paint itself. The wood of the frame seemed to shift whenever the woman's eyes happened to glance at it, and the once smooth surface of the mirror would ripple like water disturbed by rain. When the woman found herself mesmerized by the ripples, felt herself drawn to the mirror, it showed a different reflection each time, and she would wonder if that is what her husband had seen before he grew exasperated by her behaviour and packed the children away for a visit to their grandparents.

The eyes that looked back at her from the mirror were the first to change. The brown seemed to fade, the pigment leaking away, and they became green. Then the green, too, faded and turned to blue. But the blue didn't fade. The blue brightened and intensified and seemed to shine with a joy she couldn't feel within herself. Her hair lengthened and darkened, shade by shade, until it became the colour of a raven's wings and fell in waves down her back.

And yet, all the other mirrors in the house showed her very much unchanged, hair still blonde and short, and eyes still brown; however tired they seemed, they were still the same eyes, her eyes.

So she had taken to carrying around a small mirror in her pocket, and would compare her two reflections every time the red mirror in the bathroom started to ripple.

The mirror noticed that, noticed how the woman seemed to calm, her breaths deepening and becoming steadier, each time that small pocket mirror showed her that the larger reflection was a lie. The mirror didn't like that, didn't like the comfort that realization brought to the one who had inflicted such pain. So the walls continued to creak, the plaster continued to crumble, and the wooden beams screamed again, and the next time the woman's wide, wild eyes found her reflection in the mirror, the

sight that greeted her, that of a smiling woman, with blue eyes joyful and dancing, she did not reach for the pocket mirror. Her heart drummed against her ribcage violently as her shaking hands reached up to touch her face. To her horror, the hands of her reflection did not copy her movements, and there was no smile underneath her trembling fingers.

Her knees gave out, her legs unable to support her weight any longer, and they hit the cold tiles of the bathroom with a dull thud. Her eyes never left the mirror, and the blue-eyed woman stared right back at her, the smile still stretching her mouth. Something pushed at her then, raw and burning, scraping at her, and she closed her eyes against the onslaught of anger and sorrow and betrayal and *pain*.

When an emptiness, cavernous, echoing, drowned out all else and settled deep within her, she took the small mirror out of the right pocket of her pants, eyes still closed, and, after fumbling with it for a moment, brought it close to her face. When she opened it and the fog of her breath cleared from its polished surface, the eyes that stared back at her were blue. Cold. *Empty*.

# Talasi

Isprva, u njenom odrazu ne beše ničeg neobičnog.  
Translated by the students

Ogledalo je stajalo na zidu na istom mestu na kome se oduvek nalazilo, iznad umivaonika u kupatilu. Na tom mestu se nalazilo još od trenutka kada ga je u kuću donela ljupka mlada žena, a u njemu se još uvek mogao videti njen odraz koji krasiše crna kosa, plave oči i osmeh. Vremenom su bele pločice poprimile svetlozelenu boju, skoro poput mahovine; nalepnice na hladnoj površini ogledala počеше da blede, potom se lagano odlepiše, pa behu zamenjene drugima; umivaonik se polomi jednog popodneva, i umesto njega postaviše drugi, noviji; kada je pamtila bolje dane, pa je, budući sva stara i pohabana, i ona izbačena iz tesnog kupatila da bi je zamenio noviji model. Kupatilo oko ogledala se menjalo, ali ogledalo ostade isto. U njemu su se ogledale tri generacije porodice koja je živela u toj kući, dok su prali ruke i zube, i češljali kosu. Slušalo je tajne, strahove, jade i razočarenja triju generacija. No ipak su i oni, jedan po jedan, ostareli i otišli, da se nikad ne vrate, a zamenili su ih drugi. No sjaj ogledala nikad nije izbledeo, a ni lak na njegovom nagizdanom ramu nije pucao niti se ljuštio. Ogledalo je opstalo, mahom netaknuto.

Onda su zidovi počeli da škripe, malter da se kruni i mrvni na popločani pod, a drvene grede da pucaju pod težinom tavana i krova. Stara kuća više nije mogla da odoli zubu vremena. Stoga je ogledalo skinuto sa svog uobičajenog mesta na zidu i prebačeno u šupu koja je, snažna i nova, stajala u dubinama bašte; cveće i trava i prolećno zeleno lišće ogledali su se na njegovoj površini dok su ga nosili tamo. U šupi je ostalo, netaknuto, okrenuto ka jednom od prozora, gledajući radnike koji su dolazili sa izlaskom sunca, a odlazili sa zalaskom. A kada je sunce zašlo jednog dana, a izašlo sledećeg, a pritom se radnici nisu pojavili, ogledalo je strpljivo čekalo da ga vrate onamo gde je ranije stajalo. Sunce je izlazilo i zalazilo, mesečina jačala i slabila, kiša dobovala po prozorima, sneg prekrivao baštu i kopnio, bašta bi iznova cvetala, ali niko više nije ulazio u šupu. Ogledalo je tu stajalo netaknuto, i nešto se u njemu od tuge prelomi.

No dođe trenutak kada ogledalo bi opet nađeno. Premda lak beše davno otpao a boja ispod njega se okruni od hladnoće i vlage u šupi, njegova površina i dalje beše sjajna, uprkos tome što je tanak sloj prašine pokrivao svaki drugi predmet u toj maloj građevini sred divlje bašte. Nežno je vraćeno u kuću, kao neka krhka stvarčica, i ogledalo primeti da kuća više i ne liči na onu iz koje je izneto pre toliko godina. Kada se to dogodilo, ogledalo nije znalo, jer je prestalo da posmatra kuću nakon prvog proleća.

Očistili su ga i postavili pod uglom, visoko na jednom zidu porodične sobe, naspram velikog prozora koji je gledao na zelenilo bašte i zlatoglav koji je tamo cvetao. I šupa se mogla videti sa prozora, te se ogledalo uznemiri kad ugleda taj gorak prizor. Pa ipak, lica će se nanovo ogledati u njemu, kao i radost i uzbuđenje, što ga malo umiri. I tako je ogledalo stajalo tu i čekalo, čekalo, čekalo. Međutim, porodica je retko prilazila kaminu iznad koga se ogledalo nalazilo i radije su vreme provodili okupljeni oko kauča na udaljenom kraju sobe. Kada bi neko od njih i prišao, ogledalo bi videlo samo vrh glave i zlatoglav koji se u daljini njiše na vetru. Glava bi tu ostala na tren i nestala, a ogledalo bi ponovo utonulo u samoću. Mnogo puta se prisećalo para bistrih, plavih očiju na nasmešenom licu.

Duvaše jesenji vetrovi, snegovi padaše i topiše se, kiše opet oživeše zelenilo, a ogledalo ostade na zidu, netaknuto. Boja na ramu mu beše dodatno ispucala te se počela



ljuštiti i napokon, napokon porodica obrati pažnju na ogledalo, uz primedbu da je baš šteta što je tako propalo. Ogledalo se naroguši na ovu uvredu, ali nije imalo puno vremena da o tome razmišlja; skinuli su ga sa zida rano sledećeg jutra. Obuzela ga je panika, jer ogledalo nije želelo da se vrati u šupu; očajnički je želelo da ostane na zidu porodične sobe pa makar ga porodica nikad više i ne pogledala.

Ali nežne ruke ga smestiše na sto u prostoriji punoj alata, prostoriji koju ogledalo nikad ranije nije videlo, a onda te ruke prestadoše da budu nežne prema njemu. Gulile su njegov ram, i gulile, i gulile toliko da se činilo da od njega ništa više neće ostati, a onda sve poče da ga peče i boli; potom namazaše hladnu, crvenu tečnost, i na trenutak ogledalo oseti pravo blaženstvo, a onda sve poče ponovo da peče dok se ta tečnost sušila. Usledila je neka druga tečnost, ovoga puta prozirna, a njena isparenja, koja je ispuštala dok se sušila, pritiskala su površinu ogledala i toliko ga obavijala da mu se činilo kako mu mu ponestaje vazduha. A onda ogledalo više nije videlo ništa.

Ali kada su isparenja nestala, shvatilo je da opet visi na zidu. Vazduh je ovde bio čistiji, mada se smrad tečnosti namazanih po ogledalu donekle zadržao naokolo dok ga je crvena boja pločica u kupatilu podsećala na strahote koje su mu nanele one ruke, u početku nežne. Ogledalo se treslo od gneva i drhtalo od straha, i nije ga mogla umiriti čak ni činjenica da su se sada u njemu opet ogledala brojna lica. Nežne ruke koje su ga tako povredile pripadale su ženi čije se lice uvek smešilo, čije su smeđe oči razdragano gledale i čija je plava kosa bila tako sjajna da ju je bilo bolno gledati. Nije bilo pošteno, mislilo je ogledalo, da toliko često mora da gleda nju, nju koja mu nije donela ništa osim bola i patnje.

Isprva ne beše ničeg neobičnog u njenom odrazu. No, istinu govoreći, isprva nije bilo ničeg neobičnog ni na samom ogledalu.

A onda su zidovi počeli da škripe, i malter da se kruni i pada na popločani pod, i drvene grede da stenju pod težinom tavana i krova. Začudo, škripa se čula samo u kupatilu, a malter se nije ni krunio ni mrvio nigde drugde u kući i nijedna druga drvena greda nije stenjala. Svakog dana, škripanje je postajalo sve jače, svakog dana se sve više maltera odvajalo sa zida i padalo na pločice, pritom se raspadajući na komadiće, što je zvučalo kao da iglama grebete metalnu površinu, i svakog dana je stenjanje odjekivalo sve jače i jače. Od ovih zvukova nije mogla da spava noću; drhtala je u krevetu, i nije mogla ni oči da sklopi od bojazni da će je nešto ščepati u noći. A onda se stenjanje pretvori u dahtanje, a dahtanje u zavijanje, i naposletku zavijanje prestade. Nakratko, drvo utihnu, te je žena napokon mogla da provede par mirnih noći u svom krevetu kraj svog muža, koji, po svemu sudeći, nije čuo ništa; ali je smrad isparenja od boje ispunio kupatilo jednog dana, te se od njega drvene grede počеше gušiti i ispuštati stravični ropac od koga se ledila krv u žilama.

Isprva ne beše ničeg neobičnog u njenom odrazu. A onda je odraz počeo da se menja.

Više nije želela da se zadržava u kupatilu duže nego što je to bilo neophodno, jer su zvuci tamo bili najglasniji, a isparenja su se mogla osetiti u vazduhu bez obzira na to koliko dugo bi prozori ostajali otvoreni. Imala je osećaj da je tu neki par očiju stalno

posmatra, prati svaki njen pokret odnekud iza pločica koje su pokrivale škriputave zidove, te bi osetila mučninu u želucu, a u kosti bi joj se uvukla silna strepnja dok bi joj glas u glavi govorio da beži, beži, beži glavom bez obzira.

Izbegavala je i ogledalo, ne želeći da vidi podočnjake pod svojim očima koji su nesumnjivo nastali zbog manjka sna, ne želeći da vidi da joj je kosa izgubila sjaj a da iskre više nije bilo u njenim očima.

Ogledalu se to nije svidelo. Tako i ono počeo da se menja. Sjajni novi sloj crvene boje je ispucao i počeo da se ljušti, ali umesto da se ukaže bela površina koja počivaše ispod boje, drvo između pukotina činilo se ružnijim no sama farba. Izgledalo je kao da se drvo od koga beše načinjen ram pomera svaki put kad bi ga žena makar okrnula pogledom, a nekada glatka površina ogledala bi se zatalasala kao površina vode po kojoj pada kiša. Kada je shvatila da su je ti talasi opčinili, kada je osetila da je ogledalo privlači, svaki put bi u njemu videla neko svoje drugo lice, i pitala se nije li to video i njen muž pre nego što mu je dodijalo njeno ponašanje te se spakovao i sa decom otišao svojim roditeljima.

Prvo su se promenile oči koje su je gledale iz ogledala. Delovalo je kao da smeđa boja bleedi, da gubi svoj pigment, pa oči postadoše zelene. Potom i zelena izbledi, i one postadoše plave. Ali plava nije izbledela. Plava se izbistrila i pojačala i činilo se da zrači radošću koju ona sama nije mogla da oseti. Kosa joj je porasla i potamnela, nijansu po nijansu, dok nije poprimila boju gavranovog perja i u talasima padala niz njena leđa.

Sva ostala ogledala u kući pokazivala su njen neizmenjen, potpuno isti lik, i dalje kratke, plave kose, i dalje smeđih očiju; koliko god umorno izgledale, to i dalje behu iste oči, njene oči.

Zbog toga je počela da u džepu nosi ogledalce, pa bi upoređivala svoja dva odraza svaki put kada bi crveno ogledalo u kupatilu počelo da se talasa.

Ogledalo je zapazilo, zapazilo je kako se žena namah smiri, kako joj disanje postaje dublje i ravnomernije svaki put kada bi izvadila svoje džepno ogledalce koje bi je uverilo da je odraz u velikom ogledalu varka. Ogledalu se to nije svidelo; nije mu se svidela uteha koju je takvo otkrovenje pružalo onoj što mu zadade toliki bol. Stoga zidovi nastaviše da škripe, malter nastavi da se mrvi, a drvene grede nanovo zavrištaše, te idući put kada ženine razrogačene i prestrašene oči nađoše svoj odraz u ogledalu, kada ugledaše prizor nasmejane žene radosnih i razigranih plavih očiju, ona ne posegnu za džepnim ogledalom. Srce joj je silno bubnjalo u grudima a ona podiže svoje drhtave ruke u nameri da opipa lice. Na njeno zaprepašćenje, ruke u odrazu se nisu pomerale, a pod njenim drhtavim prstima ne beše osmeha.

Noge su je izdale; kolena joj popustiše i udariše u hladne pločice kupatila uz potmuo zvuk. Pogled joj ni u jednom trenutku ne skrenu sa ogledala u kome se i dalje videla plavooka žena kako je netremice gleda, usta raširenih u osmeh. Nešto je tada krenulo ka njoj, da joj nanosi bol i da je peče, stalo je grebati, a ona sklopi oči ped naletom gneva i tuge i izdaje i *bola*.



Kada u njoj nije bilo ničega osim ogromne praznine, koja je prigušila sve ostalo i ugnezdila se duboko u njoj, izvukla je ogledalce iz desnog džepa svojih pantalona, još uvek zatvorenih očiju, i, nakon što ga je nekoliko trenutaka opipavala, prinese ga svom licu. Kada ga je otvorila, i kada njegova uglačana površina nije više bila zamagljena od njenog daha, videla je u odrazu kako je pomno posmatraju oči koje behu plave. Hladne. *Prazne.*

# Skittering Frenzy

written by Uroš Pavlović

“I would like to take this opportunity to welcome all of you aboard. The Damnation will descend upon Blightwater after sundown, and Madame Freya will be delighted to provide shelter for those who seek it. Do not fret, for our arrival is guaranteed and your eternal safety all but ensured.”

Mistress Beatrice stepped down from the rotting oak table and made her way around the single room in the underbelly of the aging ship. Her steps were calm, and the brightness of her yellow eyes looked as if they were made of the same mead all my fellow passengers were indulging in. It was an odd sight, indeed – a noblewoman in Noxtooran garments of impeccable posture meddling with the low life harpooners and divers of Blightwater, whose worries for those back home seemed to have been washed away by their putrid choice of beverage. I caught her gaze, and, with an elegant quickness, she made her way to my bench, settling herself next to me.

The sight must have been perplexing to those still sober enough to discern anything other than an empty bottle from a full one. She crossed her legs effortlessly, her black dress hiding the undoubtedly flawless sitting posture the Noxtooran nobility had made famous. Her face was lost amidst the thickening cigarette smoke, but her yellow eyes pierced the near total darkness with an uncanny sharpness. She leaned towards me – her hand found its way to the back of my neck and her lips were a mere hair’s width from my ear.

“It may be intrusive of me to inquire, but it seems as though you have not quenched your thirst, does in not”? Her voice was as silky as her touch, and loud enough to overpower the yells of Blightwater’s finest.

“Your eyes fool you not, Mistress”, I responded, “for mead merely distracts me from my work.” I clenched the journal on my lap as if to reaffirm my statement. She took notice, and lunged at the opportunity to pry open my mind.

“My, my, an educated man on board a ship full of low-life scum from Blightwater? An anomaly, indeed”

“If you wish to jest, do so where the crowd does not interfere, Mistress.”

She smirked before getting up, never once taking her eyes off of me. She made her way towards the exit of the room, and I could not resist but follow her. I do not know why, but her stare was entrancing.

She was standing at the bow of the ship when I exited. The Sun and the horizon had nearly embraced, and the glow of the Moonlight Jellies was starting to fade. Unsettling thoughts ran through my mind – if we were not to reach the shelter of Madame Freya before the last of the Jellies had gone under, our journey would have been for nought. But those thoughts were purged as soon as Mistress Beatrice’s eyes gazed upon me once again, and I joined her at the bow.

“So you wish to jest, indeed.” I spoke.

“It is not jesting that interests me. You, on the other hand...” She came closer. “All I

could notice was a book, an indigo shirt, brown trousers, and a chin that sits higher than a harpooner who caught a 10-meter maverick. Iona is a long journey away, wouldn't you concur?" she taunted me.

I hate Noxtoorans.

"Admittedly, poetry and history have no place in a war-torn Iona. I myself am no warrior, and if I am to record the cruelty of Noxtoora, I desire a peaceful settlement."

"Sir Miura, I understand your dislike towards my people, but I am nought like them."

It seems as though I had struck a nerve. Good.

"I find that difficult to believe, Mistress."

She frowned and turned away from me towards the horizon. My sight caught a dark blur in the distance – our destination was close.

"Are you accustomed with the fashion of Noxtoora, Sir?" Before I could answer, she continued: "My oathsworn was eager to join the war effort against Iona, but he was no fighter. Within six sundowns I received news of his demise. I was shattered. Broken." Her right eye was starting to tear up; "I have worn this dress ever since that day. The black is for his demise, the red for his blood spilled, and my collar? For my eternal sorrow."

She paused, regaining her composure. "I was left with nothing. It hurts to be alive when you've lost the one you'd sworn your life to. But Freya... Freya saved me. Her embrace was blissful the first time I met her. I felt like I was needed. Like I had a purpose – no, a destiny. I am no longer a Noxtooran Mistress, but rather a servant of Madame Freya. She gifted me the greatest gift I had ever received – the ability to make sure that not a single soul is to suffer the same fate as my oathsworn."

I tried to speak, but nought did I speak. We stood there in silence as the Sun slowly kissed the horizon and as the Moonlight Jellies danced their way to the bottom of the ocean, to safety.

"And you?" Her now rusty voice cut through the air of silence. "Do you possess any intriguing tales of your own?"

"I do not, unless you consider poetry to be anything other than incoherent gibberish."

"I had never had a liking for poetry, I must say, but our journey has not come to an end yet, and I oh so crave something a bit less..." She looked down at the floor, and I noticed that the other passengers had become feisty; "... feral."

Her eyes once again met mine, and, as if I were hypnotized, I opened my journal and frantically searched the pages for a poem, any poem. Thirty years of writing is in here, how hard can it be to find a god-awful poem?! I frantically flipped the pages until I came upon a coffee-stained page covered in ink blobs and more crossed-out stanzas than complete ones.

“This, um, this poem may not be to your liking, but, I –I...” She put her finger on my lips, her eyes piercing as ever before, and spoke with a voice smoother than anything I have ever heard: “It will suffice, my dear Sir.”

The page was a mess, but a poem formed in my head and came out as if I had known it by heart:

Noxtoora, the great, the shadow of what once was  
Of loneliness and despair into the world you were brought  
The voracious whims of your masters  
Brought your kin to its knees  
And made it nought

Tearing yourself apart, day in, day out  
Loneliness within, never overcome, never fought  
So you sharpened your axe  
And split yourself in two  
For the loneliness to be nought

Your kindred Iona, always by your side  
Relations flourished, they thrived; respect earned, never bought  
Tore yourself in half  
To always have a friend  
For the loneliness to be nought

But your master’s whims never fully sated  
His might, his demons under control never caught  
Grasp of the ravenous  
Never satisfied, never to let go  
Until there is Noxtoora  
And all else nought

I closed the book, trying to remember when the lines were jotted down. As I looked up, I came across Mistress Beatrice's face, part confused, part delighted.

"It is... unlike anything I have heard in my time."

"Is that to be taken as a compliment?"

"It is to be taken as you wish, Sir Miura", she replied with a sly smile.

An understandable response, I thought, but I somehow felt empty, like I required her complete approval. Or maybe I just wished for the company of someone with more on their mind than fish and drink.

My gaze turned to the fading rays of light and the shadowy island of Madame Freya. By my estimates, we were no more than half an hour's sail away.

"It seems our journey is coming to an end. It was a delight, Sir Miura." Mistress Beatrice bowed slightly, and set off towards the underbelly of the ship. I was left standing at the bow, with the memory of her eyes piercing into the darkest depths of my thoughts.

The isle itself seemed completely desolate apart from the 70 or so souls that had just come off the ship. We landed on a meadow that stretched for a kilometre to either side of us, and about two kilometres straight on was a towering mountain with a castle seemingly carved into it. A few walls sticking out of the pitch-black rock could be observed; each one, I assumed, framing a bedroom with an undoubtedly jaw-dropping view. The closer we got to it, however, the more I became unnerved. The grass turned from a bright green to a dull, matte, moss-like colour; the mountain was nearly vertical, as if some bored deity had pinched the ground and pulled it out; no light came out of the few visible windows, only darkness a tad brighter than the rock; and the Sun had almost set behind the mountain, giving it an unnerving halo of bright red light that almost made me turn back towards our ship.

We arrived at the entrance just as the last rays of light were setting behind the mountain. Up close, it seemed that the walls were made out of a single, solid chunk of rock, and as Mistress Beatrice opened the doors thrice my size, they creaked with such an unholy creak that the fellow beside me nearly jumped out of his own skin.

As we entered, we were greeted by the dim lights of dusty lanterns and the smell of mould coming from the shabby rug under our feet. The room seemed to be endless, as the lanterns could not illuminate the far edges - it felt as if we had crossed the event horizon into an abyss of nothingness, yet I had an unsettling feeling of being watched.

At the far end of the room was a doorway that led to a staircase of some sorts, but it seemed unreachable, as if time itself had stopped. We picked up the pace, and the doorway started feeling like a goal - the only goal - that we had to reach. All I could think of was that doorway. It called. It yearned for me. For us. There was no past, no present, and only one future - the doorway. I could feel it pulling me in from the dis-

tance, but a sudden clank brought me back into reality. I did not know where it had come from, but as I listened, I could hear it. It was near. In front of me. Mistress Beatrice. But heels in a place like this?

We reached the doorway in what felt like an eternity and a few seconds. "This castle is situated deep within the mountain as to shelter Madame Freya from the Damnation", Mistress explained softly. "I will guide you to your resting grounds, but we shall first meet your protector. Do not fret, for you will be safe for all eternity".

That was a strange choice of words, but Noxtoorans have never been anything other than unorthodox. I turned to the fellow next to me to inquire about this peculiar scene, but he did not notice me. He seemed to be in a state of trance, lost in his own little world of mead-infused lunacy, I thought.

The staircase imbued me with a kind of horror I forgot existed. Almost every step of the way, I had to untangle myself from a myriad of cobwebs left, right, below, and above me; it was as if the staircase had a sentience of its own, accompanied by the clanking of Mistress' heels. Dread overcame me, and I lunged towards the safety of the next floor when it came into sight. I paused to catch my breath, to compose myself. Mistress Beatrice seemed not to have faced the same hardship as I; her dress was flawless, face expressionless, and posture impeccable. I turned around to await the others, and they came in steadily, but nought came after I had counted 50 people. I was perplexed. Was my mind playing tricks on me? Had I become lost in a delirium on my way up that my memory failed me? I looked for the fellow that had been next to me, looked for the scar over his left cheek, but I found him not.

Had he ever really been there?

Mistress Beatrice ushered us towards the next room, saying nought about the missing people. "You're losing your mind, Miura, there's nothing wrong if Mistress says so", I told myself.

The next room was identical to the first one we had gone through, but its dimensions felt tangible. Its far edges still weren't illuminated, but I could somehow discern the walls from the seemingly endless darkness between the shallow sources of light. We made our way to the exit, once again, but there was no staircase. It was a forking hallway with three possible directions – left, right, and back, and I sure as hell wasn't going back. Mistress turned left, and everyone followed her... though it seemed there were even fewer persons now.

It continued. More rooms. More forking hallways. More clanking. Fewer people. I had assured myself that I had become completely insane by the time we reached an enormous door the size of an overweight golem. It didn't look like it was supposed to open or let anything out, but contained whatever it was that was on the other side. But my thoughts were interrupted when it opened all on its own.

"Madame Freya awaits", said Mistress, seemingly commanding us to go first.

The dozen souls now left (were there really a dozen?) entered without hesitation,

but I stood there staring. I was frozen. Every part of my body told me not to go in, but Mistress came into my field of vision and with one look, I was on my way through the door.

Webs. Millions of webs intertwined with eggs that reached up to my torso. My mind was racing, my body refused to cooperate. I was standing there, thinking what the hell was going on, how was possible, wha-

Thunk. The door shut behind me. A familiar chuckle cut the still air. I dared not look behind me, for it dawned on me. I raced to the only window in the room, the thumps of my footsteps mixing with the unholy sound of flesh being torn. I got to the window only to be greeted by the sight of a vertical drop and an endless ocean. I saw a dim light, one last Moonlight Jelly dancing, on its way to the void of the ocean.

It finally dawned upon me that I had not escaped the Damnation.

I had willingly walked straight into it.

I turned around, expecting to find a bloodbath, but no blood had been spilled. The dozen survivors were standing still, entranced, glaring into the thousands upon thousands of spider eggs that filled the room. But next to the door was Mistress. Her skin had turned black, as black as the walls of the room; her dress was nowhere to be found; her legs elongated, and her heels were not heels, but sharp, red-tipped claws. Six more them extended from her back, over her shoulders, and rested near her face which was turning inside out, revealing fangs that bright yellow venom-dripped from. And her eyes. Four pairs of the same, piercing, mead-coloured eyes.

She took small steps, transforming in the process, growing ever larger, ever hungrier. She went for the rest of my group, seemingly ignoring me. I rushed towards the door and threw myself at it. It opened, to my surprise, but a sharp pain ripped through my right shoulder as I fell on the floor. I could barely get my bearings straight. Getting back on my feet was torturous. I trudged along the stone hallway, accompanied by the sounds of that ravenous beast tearing its fangs into warm flesh.

The echoes followed me to the point where the hallway split into two, but... there were no stairs. Only left and right. I was dumbfounded, horrified that I may lose myself in this stone prison, but a screech echoed through the hallways, freezing my blood and causing my heart to sink.

“Do not leave!” the creature screamed, its devilish growl overpowering the softness of the Mistress’ previous iteration. I turned right, running as fast as my legs could carry me, but the room once again seemed endless. The torches were now accompanied by hundreds of tiny, red eyes, all seemingly enjoying the spectacle. I felt the silkiness of the cobwebs once again, and terror overcame me.

I sprinted out the room, hyperventilating, only to be greeted by another binary choice of identical hallways and identical rooms. It was left this time. “Come back!” the creature screamed, this time closer than before.

Endless rooms.

Endless screams.

No end in sight.

I'd lost count of how many rooms I'd gone through, how many cobwebs I'd destroyed, how many spiders had skittered past me in the total darkness.

Left. Right. It didn't matter. I was stuck in this hellhole. I was in her web, at her mercy, my past non-existent, my present irrelevant, my future... only her.

Left.

Right.

Right.

Door.

I see it. The door at the entrance. I screamed instinctively, my ordeal was over. OVER. I can- no, I WILL escape this wretched place.

"I DESIRE TO... GIVE YOU... A GIFT..." Her voice was excruciatingly close.

I used the last of my energy to sprint towards the door, barely keeping myself from falling. There was the door, and only the door.

I finally reached it. It's over. IT'S OVER. I lunged towards it. The metal handle. I pulled, pulled with all my might, all that was left in me. It creaked. It was opening. I tugged one last time, and it swung open.

"NO ESCAPE", she screeched as the door reached the halfway point of its arc. She was there. The other side of the door. But it had already opened, there was no going back, and instead of freedom, there she was, hanging from a web, upside down, venom running down her face. My size. Black body. Red patterns. Eight eyes staring at me.

Time froze. For a split second, I was left facing her. My body froze. It had given up. It had accepted its fate.

But my mind refused, instinct took over. I closed my eyes. Inhaled, opened my mouth...

But nought came out.

And I opened my eyes.

But I saw nought.

For Noxtoora had found me.

And I was nought.





# Rastuće ludilo

translated by the students

„Ovom prilikom bih svima htela da poželim dobrodošlicu na brod. Propast će zahvatiti Blajtvoter nakon zalaska sunca, a Madam Freji će biti drago da pruži utočište svima koji ga žele. Samo bez brige; znajte da je naš dolazak zagaranтовan a da se vaša sigurnost ni sada a ni ubuduće ne dovodi u pitanje.”

Gospodarica Beatris spustila se sa trulog stola od hrastovine i prošetala se kabinom u utrobi već starog broda. Njeni koraci behu nečujni, i činilo se kao da su joj sjajne žute oči od same medovine u kojoj su svi moji saputnici uživali. Taj prizor beše zaista čudan – dama obučena u noksturijansku nošnju, savršenog držanja, među ovim ološem od ribara i ronilaca sa Blajtvotera, koji su pod uticajem lošeg pića prestali da brinu za svoje bližnje koje su ostavili kod kuće. Naši pogledi se susretoše, te ona otmenim koracima ubrzo dođe do moje klupice i sede do mene.

Prizor je verovatno bio začuđujući svima koji su još uvek bili trezni i u stanju da razaznaju bilo šta drugo osim praznu boce od pune. Ležerno je prekrstila noge, a njena crna haljina je skrivala besprekorno držanje koje je noksturijansko plemstvo činilo prepoznatljivim. Njeno lice se nije moglo dobro videti u gustom dimu cigareta, ali se prodoran pogled njenih žutih očiju nekom nestvarnom oštrinom probijao kroz najmračniju tamu. Nagnula se ka meni, njena ruka se zaustavila na mom vratu, a njene usne su mi skoro dodirivale uho.

„Možda sam malo nametljiva, ali mi deluje kao da niste utolili žeđ, jesam li u pravu?” Njen glas beše mekan poput njenog dodira ali sam ga ipak čuo i usred vike najglasnijih mornara na Blajtvoteru.

„Oči Vas uopšte ne varaju, gospodarice”, odgovorio sam, “nisam jer mi medovina odvlači misli od posla.” U želji da to i potvrdim, prstima stegoh dnevnik u svom krilu. Ona je to primetila i utom brže bolje krenula da mi se uvlači pod kožu.

„Bože, bože, školovan čovek na brodu sa šljmom sa Blajtvotera? Pa to je stvarno čudno.”

„Ukoliko želite da zbijate šale, učinite to tamo gde nema ovoliko ljudi, gospodarice.”

Osmehnula se pre nego što je ustala, ni u jednom trenutku ne skidajući pogled sa mene. Uputila se ka vratima da izađe iz sobe, a ja nisam mogao da odolim da ne pođem za njom. Ne znam zašto, ali bilo je nečeg u njenom pogledu što me je gotovo hipnotisalo.

Stajala je na pramcu broda u trenutku kad sam izašao iz sobe. Sunce i horizont su se gotovo spojili kao u nekom zagrljaju, a sjaj Mesečevih Meduza je polako počeo da bleđi. Uznemirujuće misli prolazile su mi kroz glavu – ako ne stignemo do utočišta Madam Freje pre nego što sve Mesečeve Meduze nestanu, naše putovanje biće uzaludno. No sve te misli nestadoše onog trenutka kada me gospodarica Beatris ponovo pogleda. Pridružio sam joj se na pramcu.

„Dakle, ipak želite da se malo šalite”, rekao sam.

„Nije to ono što me interesuje. Vi, pak ...” Približila mi se. „Jedino što sam mogla da

primetim jeste da nosite knjigu, da na sebi imate košulju indigo boje i braon pantalaone, i da idete uzdignute glave kao da ste ribar koji je upecao gromadu od deset metara. Slažete se da do Ajone ima još dosta da se putuje, zar ne?”, govorila je sa posmehom u glasu.

Mrzim Noksturijance.

„Kao što je svima poznato, poeziji i istoriji nema mesta u ratom razorenoj Ajoni. Ja lično nisam ratnik, ali ne želim da se sa Vama sporim oko toga koliko su Noksturijanci okrutni.“

„Gospodine Miura, jasno mi je da ne gajite simpatije prema mom narodu, ali ja nisam kao oni.“

Delovalo je kao da sam je pogodio baš u živac. Odlično.

„Teško mi je da u to poverujem, gospodarice.“

Namrštila se, okrenula mi leđa i gledala ka horizontu. Uočio sam neku crnu tačku u daljini – bili smo sve bliže našem odredištu.

„Da li poznajete modu Noksturijanaca, gospodine?” Pre nego što sam uspeo da išta odgovorim, nastavila je: „Čovek koji mi se obećao žudno je otišao u rat protiv Ajone, ali nije bio neki borac. Nakon što je sunce šest puta zašlo, dobila sam tužne vesti, vesti o njegovoj smrti. Bila sam skrhana. Slomljena.” Desno oko joj je zasuzilo. „Od tog dana nosim ovu crnu haljinu. Crno je za njegov tragični kraj, crveno za krv koju je prolio, a moja kragna? Kragna je simbol moje večne patnje.”

Zastala je a onda nastavila nakon što se pribrala. „Ništa mi nije ostalo. Bolno je živeti kada izgubite onog kome ste se obećali za ceo život. Ali Freja... Freja me je spasila. Kada smo se prvi put srele, njen zagrljaj je bio pravi blagoslov. Osetila sam kao da još uvek nekome trebam. Kao da moj život ima svrhu... ne, kao da je to moja sudbina. Više nisam noksturijanska dama, već sluga Madam Freje. Podarila mi je nešto najznačajnije što sam ikada mogla dobiti – sposobnost da ne dozvolim da niko više ne iskusi patnje koje je moj dragi iskusio“.

Pokušao sam da izgovorim nešto, ali ne mogah. Stajali smo u tišini dok je sunce polako ljubilo horizont i dok su se Mesečeve Meduze lelujavu spuštale na dno okeana, na sigurno.

„A Vi?”. Njen već promukli glas sasekao je tišinu. „Da li Vi imate neku zanimljivu priču koju biste mi ispričali?”

„Nemam, osim ukoliko ne mislite da je poezija nešto više od nepovezanog trtljanja.”

„Moram priznati da mi se poezija nikada nije sviđala, ali naše putovanje još uvek traje, i meni treba nešto što nije baš ovoliko....” Pogledala je ka donjem spratu; primetio sam da su ostali putnici postali živahni; „... sirovo.”

Naši pogledi su se ponovo sreli, a ja sam, kao hipnotisan, otvorio svoj dnevnik i mah-

nito okretao stranice ne bih li pronašao pesmu, bilo kakvu pesmu. Nakon trideset godina pisanja, kako je moglo biti ovoliko teško naći jednu prokletu pesmu?! Kao sumanut sam listao stranice dok nisam naleteo na jednu sa mrljama od kafe, umrljanu mastilom i sa mnogo više precrtanih nego završenih strofa.

„Uh, ovo Vam se možda neće dopasti, ali ja – ja...” primakla je svoj prst mojim usnama i progovorila najnežnijim glasom koji sam ikada čuo dok me je prodorno gledala: „To će biti dovoljno, dragi moj gospodine.”

Cela stranica je bila jedan pravi užas, ali se pesma nekako stvorila u mojoj glavi i čitao sam je kao da je znam napamet.

Noksturo, velika, senko onoga sto beše

Na svet te donesoše usamljenost i očajanje

Halapljive želje tvojih vladara

Poniziše tvoj rod

I učiniše ga ništavnim

Kidaš se svakog dana

Usamljenost iznutra nikad ne porazi

Pa ti sekiru svoju naoštri

Na dva dela se prepolovi

Da bi usamljenost nestala

Sestra tvoja Ajona, uvek uz tebe

Veze cvetahu, uspešne; poštovanje zarađeno, nikad kupljeno

Na pola si se pokidala

Da bi uvek prijatelja imala

Da bi usamljenost nestala

Al' tvoj gospodar nikad svoju ćud ne zasiti

Nikad svoju moć, svoje demone ne ukroti

Pohlepni stisak njegov

Nikad udovoljen nikad ne pusti

Sve dok je Noksture

A sve ostalo nestalo.

Zatvorio sam knjigu i pokušao da se setim kad sam zapisao te stihove. Kako sam podigao pogled, ugledao sam lice gospodarice Beatrise, koje je bilo polu zbunjeno, polu oduševljeno.

„Nije... nalik ničemu što sam za života čula.”

„Da li da to shvatim kao kompliment?”

„Shvatite to kako želite, gospodine Miura”, odgovorila je, smeškajući se lukavo.

Razumljiv odgovor, pomislio sam, ipak, nekako sam se osećao prazno, kao da mi je bilo potrebno njeno potpuno odobrenje. Ili mi je samo bilo potrebno društvo nekog ko nije razmišljao samo o piću i ribi.

Moj pogled se zaustavi na zracima svetlosti koji su nestajali i na ostrvo Madam Freje koje se nejasno moglo nazreti. Po mojoj proceni, od ostrva smo bili udaljeni nekih pola sata plovidbe.

„Izgleda kao da se naše putovanje bliži kraju. Bilo mi je zadovoljstvo, gospodine Miura.” Blago se naklonivši, gospodarica Beatris krenu ka utrobi broda. Ostao sam sam na pramcu, sa uspomenom na njen pogled kojim je uspela da prodre do mojih najskrivenijih misli.

Samo ostrvo bilo bi pusto da ne beše nas sedamdesetak koji upravo kročismo na njegovo tlo. Iskricali smo se na livadu koja se prostirala oko kilometar i sa naše leve i sa naše desne strane, dok se na dva kilometra ispred nas uzdizala visoka planina sa zamkom gotovo isklesanim u njoj. Moglo se videti nekoliko zidova kako štrče iz kao noć crnog kamena, a svaki od njih je, pomislio sam, verovarno zid od spavaće sobe sa pogledom koji oduzima dah. Ali, što smo se više približavali zamku, to me je više obuzimala strepnja. Trava, koja je na početku puta bila svetlo zelene boje, sada je izgledala mrtvo, bez sjaja i boje mahovine; padine planine su bile skoro potpuno okomite, i činilo se kao da je neko božanstvo kome je bilo dosadno uštinulo zemlju i tako je izvuklo naviše; nikakvo svetlo se nije moglo videti u ono malo prozora koje smo uočili, samo tama za nijansu svetlija od crnog kamena; a sunce je gotovo zašlo iza planine i za njim je ostao svetlo crveni trag koji je poput oreola uznemirujuće lebdeo iznad nje, zbog čega se umalo nisam vratio na naš brod.

Stigli smo do ulaza u trenutku kad su poslednji zraci sunca nestajali iza planine. Izbliza, delovalo je kao da su zidovi isklesani od jedne jedine kamene gromade i kada je gospodarica Beatris otvorila vrata, koja behu tri puta veća od mene, ona su tako avetinjski zaškripela da momak pored mene umalo nije presvisnuo od straha.

Kada smo ušli, videli smo samo prigušeno svetlo iz prašnjavih fenjera i osetili miris buđi koji je dopirao iz pohabanog ćilima na podu. Sobi nije bilo kraja, ili je pak tako

izgledalo, jer se pod svetlošću fenjera nije mogla cela videti – činilo mi se da smo prešli svaku granicu u vremenu i prostoru i upali u ambis ništavila; ipak, sve vreme sam imao neprijatan osećaj da me neko posmatra.

U donjem delu sobe bila su vrata kroz koja se izlazi na nekakvo stepenište, ali je delovalo kao da je do njih nemoguće doći, kao da je vreme sasvim stalo. Pustili smo korak i dolazak do vrata nam je postao cilj, jedini cilj koji smo želili da dostignemo. Ta vrata su mi potpuno zaokupila misli. Zvala su me. Čeznula su za mnom. Za nama. Nije bilo nikakve prošlosti, sadašnjosti, već samo jedna budućnost – budućnost koju su donosila ta vrata. Osetio sam kako me iz daljine uvlače, ali me jedan iznenadni zvuk vrati u realnost. Nisam znao odakle dopire, ali kada sam oslušnuo, mogao sam ga jasno čuti. Bio je blizu. Ispred mene. Gospodarica Beatris. Ali zašto je nosila štikle na ovakvom mestu?

Do vrata nam je trebala čitava večnost, i koji sekund preko. „Ovaj zamak je smešten duboko u planini ne bi li zaštitio Madam Freju od Prokletstva”, gospodarica objasni nežnim glasom. „Odvešću vas do vaših soba ali prvo ćemo se upoznati sa vašom zaštitnicom. Ne bojte se, bićete na sigurnom zauvek.”

Izbor reči mi beše čudan, ali Noksturijanci ne bi bili to što jesu da je sve u vezi njih jasno. Okrenuo sam se ka mladiću pored mene ne bih li ga pitao nešto o ovome što se upravo zbilo, ali me on nije ni primetio. Činilo se kao da je u transu, pomislio sam da je izgubljen u svom sopstvenom svetu pod uticajem ludila izazvanog medovinom.

Same stepenice su izazivale takav strah u meni da sam zaboravio da sam uopšte živ. Na skoro svakom stepeniku morao sam da se nekako izborim sa paučinom koja se prostirala unedogled, i levo, i desno, i ispod i iznad; a same stepenice kao da su imale svoju sopstvenu svest koja se menjala prateći zvuk gospodaricinih štikli. Užas me je obuzeo, pa sam pojurio ka sledećem spratu čim sam ga ugledao jer mi je donosio nekakav osećaj sigurnosti. Zastao sam da bih došao do vazduha, da bih se pribrao. Činilo se kao da se gospodarica Beatris ne suočava sa istim poteškoćama kao ja; njena haljina je i dalje bila besprekorna, lice bezizražajno a držanje savršeno. Okrenuo sam se da sačekam druge koji su polako dolazili, ali sam izbrojao samo njih pedesetoro. Bio sam zbunjen. Da li se to moj um poigrava sa mnom? Da li sam toliko poludeo dok sam se peo uz stepenice da sam počeo da zaboravljam? Potražio sam mladića koji je bio do mene, tražio njegov ožiljak na levom obrazu, ali ga nisam našao.

Da li je on uopšte postojao?

Gospodarica Beatris nas je uvela u sledeću sobu, bez ijedne reči o ljudima koji nedostaju. „Gubiš razum, Miura, sve je u redu ako gospodarica tako kaže”, rekao sam sebi.

Sledeća soba bila je identična onoj sobi kroz koju smo prvo prošli, ali ovde su njene razmere bila opipljive. Najudaljeniji uglovi sobe nisu bili osvetljeni, ali nekako sam uspeo da razaznam zidove usred beskrajne tmine i pod slabom svetlošću. Ponovo smo stigli do izlaza, ali sada nije bilo stepenica. Ispred nas se nalazio hodnik koji se račvao u tri pravca: levo, desno i nazad, ali bogami nije bilo šanse da krenem nazad. Gospodarica je skrenula levo, i svi smo pošli za njom ... iako je delovalo kao da je sada još manje ljudi nego ranije.

Išli smo dalje. Sve više soba. Hodnika koji su se račvali. Više buke. Manje ljudi. Već sam bio ubedio samog sebe da sam načisto poludeo kad stigosmo pred ogromna vrata, vrata veličine nekog debelog golema. Činilo se kao da ih je nemoguće otvoriti, kao da niko kroz njih i ne može izaći, kao da čuvaju šta god da se nalazilo sa te druge strane. Tok misli mi se prekinuo kad su se vrata otvorila sama od sebe.

„Madam Freja vas očekuje.“, reče gospodarica, kao da nam naređuje da krenemo prvi.

Dvanaest preostalih duša (da li ih je uopšte bilo dvaneast?) uđoše u sobu bez okleivanja, dok sam ja stajao i netremice gledao. Krv mi se sledila u žilama. Svaki atom u mom telu mi je naređivao da ne pođem unutra, ali čim sam uočio gospodaricu, jedan njen pogled je bio dovoljan da krenem kroz ta vrata.

Mnogo paučine. Na milion niti paučine preplitalo se sa jajašcima koja su dosezala do mojih grudi. Misli su mi jurile, a telo odbijalo da sarađuje. Stajao sam tamo, pitao se šta se to dođavola dešava, kako je ovo bilo stvarno, Šta – Tras. Vrata se za mnom zatvoriše. Poznat smeh sasekao je ustajali vazduh. Nisam se usudio da pogledam iza sebe, jer mi je u tom trenutku sinulo ko je to bio. Potrčao sam ka jednom jedinom prozoru u sobi, bat mojih koraka mešao se sa užasnim zvukom kidanja mesa. Došao sam do prozora sa koga sam ispod sebe ugledao skoro uspravnu liticu i beskrajni okean. Video sam neko prigušeno svetlo, to je bila poslednja Mesečeva Meduza koji se talasala ka pustom okeanu.

Konačno mi je svanulo da ja zapravo nisam izbegao Propast.

Ja sam svojevolumno koračao ka njoj.

Okrenuo sam se, očekujući da vidim krvoproliće, ali nije bilo ni traga krvi. Dvanaestoro preživelih su nepomično stajali, opčinjeno gledali u hiljade i hiljade paukovih jajašca koja su ispunjavala sobu. Ali odmah do vrata stajala je gospodarica. Njena koža poprimila je crnu boju, crnu poput zidova sobe, na sebi nije imala haljinu; noge su joj se izdužile, a štikle više nisu bile štikle, već oštre kandže, crvene pri vrhu. Još šest nogu izašlo je iz njenih leđa, prešlo preko njenih ramena, i zadržalo se pored njenog lica koje se potpuno izobličilo, otkrivajući očajne sa kojih je kapao žuti otrov. A njene oči. Četiri para istih prodornih očiju boje medovine.

Kretala se sporim koracima, pri čemu se menjala i rasla sve više i bivala sve gladnija i gladnija. Krenula je ka ostalima iz moje grupe, naizlged se ne obazirući na mene. Potrčao sam ka vratima i bacio se na njih. Na moje iznenađenje, otvorila su se, ali dok sam padao na zemlju, osetio sam oštar bol kako mi para desno rame. Jedva sam došao sebi. S mukom sam stao na noge. Sve vreme dok sam uzmicao niz kameni hodnik, čuo sam halapljivu zver kako svojim čeljustima kida toplo meso.

Odzvanjalo je sve do mesta gde se hodnik račva u dva pravca, ali ... tu više nije bilo stepenica. Mogli ste samo levo ili desno. Bio sam zapanjen, prestravljen da ću zauvek ostati zatočen u ovom kamenom zatvoru, a onde se niz hodnike čulo kreštanje koje mi je zaledilo krv u žilama i obeshrabrilo.



„Ne odlazi!”, stvorenje je vrisnulo, a njegovo režanje kao u đavola zamenilo je umilni glas kojim je gospodarica ranije govorila. Skrenuo sam desno, trčao koliko me noge nose, ali je soba ponovo izgledala kao da joj nema kraja. Pored upaljenih baklji, sada su se mogle videti na stotine sićušnih, crvenih očiju, koje su naizgled uživale u svemu što se odvijalo. Ponovo sam osetio dodir svilenih niti paučine i strah me je obuzeo.

Istrčao sam iz sobe i krenuo da dišem ubrzano, a onda sam se ponovo suočio sa identičnim hodnicima i sobama. Ovog puta skrenuo sam levo. „Vrati se!”, stvorenje je urliknulo, ali sada mi je bilo bliže nego ranije.

Bezbroj soba.

Bezbroj urlika.

Kraja nije bilo.

Više nisam znao kroz koliko soba sam prošao, koliko sam paučine sklonio, koliko paukova je projurilo pored mene u potpunoj tami.

Levo. Desno. Nije važno. Zaglavljen sam u ovom paklu. U njenoj sam paučini, u njenoj milosti, moja prošlost ne postoji, moja sadašnjost nevažna, moja budućnost ... samo ona.

Levo.

Desno.

Desno.

Vrata.

Vidim ih. Ulazna vrata. Instinktivno sam vrisnuo, došao je kraj mom mučenju. KRAJ. Ja mogu- ne, ja ĆU pobeći iz ovog jadnog mesta.

„JA... ŽELIM... DA... TI PODARIM NEŠTO...” Njen glas bio nepodnošljivo blizu.

Potrčao sam ka vratima sa ono malo snage što mi je preostalo, pokušavajući da ne padnem. Tamo su stajala vrata, i samo vrata.

Konačno sam došao do njih. Kraj je. KRAJ JE. Bacio sam se na njih. Metalna kvaka. Vučem je, vučem svom svojom snagom, sa onim što je ostalo u meni. Vrata škripe. Otvaraju se. Povukao sam još samo jednom, i vrata se otvoriše.

„NEMA IZLAZA!”, povikala je kreštavim glasom kada su se vrata otvorila do pola. Ona je bila tu. Sa druge strane vrata. Ali već su se otvorila, nije dolazilo u obzir vraćati se, a umesto slobode čekala je ona, visila okrenuta naglavačke, dok joj se sa lica slivao otrov. Velika kao ja. Crnog tela. Sa crvenim šarama. Osam očiju direktno uprtih u mene.

Vreme je stalo. Samo delić sekunde sam gledao direktno u nju. Moje telo se sledilo. Odustao sam. Samo telo je shvatilo šta sledi.

Ali moj um se branio, povučen instinktom. Zatvorio sam oči. Udahnuo, otvorio usta...

Ali zvuka ne beše.

I otvorih oči.

Ali ne videh ništa.

Jer me Nokstura konačno pronađe.

I mene više ne beše.

# The High Walls Of Cerebrum

written by Dejan Pavlović

The portals of the edifice were humongous. Three tall double-winged doors, made of heavy wood, oak possibly, weathered from all the years of their curious existence. The glass on all the wings was blurred, as if to further obstruct whatever had been going on outside from time immemorial. Of course, it would be reasonable to suggest that the doors were five, or ten, or fifteen feet high – even height is finite. Yet this entrance seemed indefinitely high, its upper part being at first somewhat veiled by a thin layer of mist, then gradually entering full blown thick fog. No one seemed to know where the portals ended. Yes, there were floors above the ground level – and indescribable multitude of floors – but, you see, all the ceilings in the edifice were somewhat hazy, impalpable. Hence the fog-covered top of the entrance was nothing much out of the ordinary. It was taken for granted, I guess, by everyone else inside, and I did not deviate from the norm. Only later, after the whole ordeal had become an unsteady memory, did it occur to me that many things within the edifice were ... unusual, so to speak.

The floors. I know not how many. I had come across a plethora of signs, all over the building, saying “Third Floor”, “Thirty-Third Floor”, “Floor of 69”. It was easy to deduce that the damn place was colossal. But it further messed up one’s head when these particular signs would be found on three adjacent floors. And never on the same levels either. As if these signs had life and limb, and were moving between storeys when no one was looking. And you could never expect what you would see on some of these. Once I happened upon a “Floor 51”, where strangely looking humanoid creatures, small, hairless, with great black eyes, were busily roaming the corridors, as if they had appeared there from somewhere outside, all of a sudden, and were seeking an explanation for their peculiar situation.

But one would be remiss to assume that such signs and denizens notwithstanding, it was in any way easy to go about the edifice. All the corridors looked the same. High walls (hazy ceilings – check!), painted in gray, or pale yellow, or sludgy white – I wouldn’t know, it was such a life-sucking nuance that it was truly hard to comprehend the color. No one knew how long these walls had been here anyway, so nobody cared (or dared, maybe) to inquire about the paintjob. The corridors themselves were strenuously long, and due to their monotonous appearance, partly resembled a tube. There were pictures on the walls, naturally. Personalities who seemed to be famous or infamous for a reason. Which would not pose a problem if their faces were not grotesquely disfigured in various ways. Excessively large eyes and foreheads, overemphasized jaws, and almost exclusively with a traumatized or overwrought expression. A gallery of the obscene, of the distraught, of the restless.

Seeing that it was impossible to obtain any information on the state of the surroundings outside, one could be forgiven for thinking that there were no windows on the building. There were. A lot of them. On each floor, right opposite the sickening gallery. But, you see, that was where the problem lay. You could not actually see anything from these windows. A huge storm had been blowing outside for eons on end, it seemed. Constant whirlwinds of relentless matter flying hither and thither, obstructing the view outside. No ground, no skies. For all I knew, the building could

have been floating on air. And the winds howled eerily, as if populated by demons. Sometimes it would sound like a single tortured soul gnawing its way through inferno. Other times it would reverberate like a choir of martyred spirits scrambling every which way for an exit out of their misery. Even if someone knew what the vicinity was actually like, nobody would dare leave the premises, for fear of being annihilated by whatever phantasms lurked outdoors.

Now, mind you, I was not the only one inside. There were a host of other people wandering throughout the corridors. Some were very familiar to me, and I could later even remember their faces without much effort. A plump girl of medium height with curly brown hair and a loud, shrill voice. A taller, slimmer girl with waist-long red hair; mealy-mouthed, she seemed. A short raven-haired fellow with a beard and a talent for aggravating others. Yet for every familiar face there came a dozen people or so whose face I couldn't remember at all afterwards. Not for a lack of trying, mind you. Most of them had no face to speak of, carrying a blank expression without any specific features whatsoever. Plain skin without any lines, like a plastic bag laid on top of a smooth stone. Once in a while I would, in passing, catch a glimpse on some of them, a glimpse of something akin to life, to a pulse, or something of the sort. But that did not happen often, and they mostly wandered aimlessly around the place, looking blindly at the pictures, or mumbling wordlessly to themselves.

How long I had dwelt in the place, I scarcely knew. There had been an elusive feeling of existence prior to the edifice, something intangible, something that reeked of ... Happiness. Vivid colors. Variety. But those had gone away at some point, and I was left to explore the building of my own accord, which became my only point of interest. I often had the companionship of the dwellers most familiar to me, although their company would at times render me very uncomfortable. The things they were saying were often wearisome, and would make me feel uneasy, unhappy, or disheartened. Many a time I would suffer an outburst of furious anxiety or orgasmic wrath because of them, which terrified me. So I tried to shy away from them after some time had passed, but was not able to sustain my solitude for long, as they would keep finding me, even in the remotest corners of the building. So I was almost always in the company of one of them, whether I desired it or not.

During one of these sojourns, I discovered a special room on one of the floors. The floor was labeled "Ground Zero". As for the room, it quickly became the one place where those unruly comrades of mine did not seem to visit me, and hence my safest sanctuary. It was the library. I did not know whether that was by accident or not, yet none of them shared my interest in the written word. And I had absolutely no clue why someone had created such a glorious room amongst so many disillusioning ones, and supplied it with so many troves of knowledge when there was scarcely anyone to read them. Walls upon walls of tomes upon tomes of words upon words on anything and everything one would desire to know.

But there were few people. All of them had faces, grave, solemn, up to their necks in books. And none of them seemed to speak, at all. In fact, the whole room appeared acoustically stifled. Once I tried to draw the attention of an elderly man reading op-

posite me, and other times of a few other souls next to myself. But I had not been able to utter a single sound, my words seemingly choking and expiring at the very edge of my mouth. So after a few attempts, I quit, reasoning that I was none the worse there than roaming through the corridors, so why not explore the contents of this curious but fascinating room to their full extent? Little did I know what was waiting for me.

During the hours (or it could have been decades) spent there, and amid much enthralling content, I discovered a vast volume with only the word "**CEREBRUM**" inscribed on it. It was immense, with more than a thousand pages within. Yet when I desired to open it, I could only go through the first thirty pages or so. The rest of them seemed to be firmly glued together. Even so, the initial chapters were quite astonishing. They told the story of a curious place, not dissimilar to where I was, where strange things occur and odd forces lurk. Forces the means of which is only to smother disoriented souls into oblivion, to crush them into infinite discontent and trepidation. The only way for a miserable psyche to flee the cruel weight of such a place is to be rendered conscious, seemingly out of nowhere, of the terrible darkness brought about by dwelling there; darkness completely overpowering the souls from the inside, making them hollow, then filling them up with bile and toxic fumes, so they can bathe in their self-loathing until their time is done. But even if the soul becomes aware of this foul play, it cannot possibly leave the premises, for outside is the Void, a tremendous unknown space; no one has ever walked into the Void and come back to speak of it, although it is considered to be brutally uninhabitable.

And then the story stopped, mid-page, on the left side of the book. The right side, on the surface, appeared blank, and the rest of them, as previously mentioned, were stuck together. However, upon closer inspection of the final page on the right side, a few words could be discerned, as if a written page had been torn from the book, leaving traces of writing on the paper below. The following words listed were: flee, abscond, make off, break free, escape, take flight, slip away. Nothing else.

I did not take any serious notice of the words at first, considering them to be someone's note made in passing in the lack of a separate piece of paper. I did not make much of the story either. I enjoyed it, for it proved to be a consolation of sorts. After all, I was not in such a wretched place, was I? Sure, my company here was scarce and somewhat unnerving, but there were all sorts of things one could experience in this place. Strange creatures, curious characters, vast knowledge. Yet neither the words, nor the story could leave my thoughts at all since reading them, and I contemplated their meaning for days on end.

My companions sensed that something was amiss, and I told them of the story. I was stunned and confused by their reactions. The curly-haired one ridiculed the story, and laughed at my fascination with such nonsense. The tall one did the opposite, feeding me overblown compliments to my imagination and enthusiasm for such stories. The raven-haired fellow was visibly shaken, but tried to maintain his composure by saying a number of things in favor of our residence. Their behavior left me baffled for days, wondering why such a story would cause so profound a reaction on their part.

And one day it dawned on me. For a long time, years, decades possibly, it had not occurred to me that anything might be wrong. And then a miniscule thought appeared in my mind: the story described a place highly similar to the edifice. What if there were forces at play *here*, forces which sought to keep *me* inside and render *me* incapable of any further action by any means necessary? The thought developed into an all-encompassing realization: the story **was** about this place! **This** was Cerebrum! **This** was the place where souls met their untimely end. Although it took me a lot of time to discover the reason, I had been feeling very pressured and claustrophobic for ages, and conversations with my companions did not help. Companions? The wretched extended hands of whoever was running this charade! And the listed words? Oh, how could I have been so blind for so long?! Whoever had written that book made it brimful of more than obvious hints. I needed to escape, somehow, anyhow, before being tormented into hollowness. I could not allow all of these forces to grind me down. But *they* had to be oblivious of my idea ... And furthermore, where could I go? Judging by the story, the exterior was no less uninviting than the interior. I could meet an even more terrifying end just by stepping outside. Yet, upon considering the rising oppression of the edifice, I opted to at least try and glimpse the outside world, even if it cost me my flimsy existence.

Many an hour had gone by with me trying to locate any possible passage which could lead me out of the edifice, or at least offer me something tangible of the building's exterior, which could in turn possibly encourage me in my efforts of escape. I decided early on that exiting through the front door was not an option, as I would most likely be noticed by one wandering soul or another, for which I had no desire. Besides, I reasoned that those portals were heavy, possibly locked or at least impossible to open. So I focused my strength on any possible alternative. I examined every nook and cranny, every miniscule corner I could find, simultaneously trying to keep a straight face when accompanied by my cohorts, for whom I felt nothing but growing resentment. By chance, I even managed to stumble upon what seemed to be the foundation of the building, a basement of sorts, with its own maze of small rooms and long, narrow hallways. But even there all the windows were barred and shut, and any door which could have potentially taken me outside was also firmly closed. The only useful thing I could manage to find was a rusted old blade, a small iron thing which looked entirely out of place there. Yet a voice in my mind told me I might need it eventually, so I stuck it inside my pocket, after carefully observing whether any other soul was near. Trying to reach the top of the building and the roof proved impossible due to the shifting floors. The tension and despair within me were mounting.

And who knows how this whole crisis might have ended had I not discovered a brand new floor. Or a room, rather. "The Chamber of the Self". The entire floor appeared consumed by this vast room. But its contents were even more puzzling. Mirrors. Hundreds of them. Now, the notion of seeing my own reflection was not alien to me. I had come across an odd-looking glass here and there, all over the edifice. This chamber, however, was tantamount to overkill. Some mirrors were realistic enough, almost too much so, as it were. In them I could notice how I was: dwindling physi-



cally, my spine slowly giving way, my face and eyes growing older. Others offered a distorted or even disguised view of my persona. In these, on the other hand, I could see myself in all manner of ways: crawling on all fours like a beast, with an oversized mouth and teeth, or, on the contrary, eyeless and mouthless; reduced to a repulsive, enlarged head; as a raging lunatic, screaming his head off, or, conversely, at utmost peace. As one could imagine, the Chamber made me uncomfortable very quickly, yet it had another surprise waiting in the wings.

As I was going through the room, I realized the room narrowed down on the opposite side. At the very end there seemed to be another mirror, not too different from all the others; however, the light on that side had apparently gone out, and I could only barely discern the lower part of my reflection as I approached it. Yet once I got close to it, the light suddenly came on, and I jumped backwards, startled. Regaining my courage, I took a step towards the mirror again, establishing that it was just another looking glass, and the reality of my reflection placated me.

The tranquility would not last long. In a split second I realized that my reflection was not moving following my own movements, but of its own accord. And before I could properly react in any way, *it* spoke:

“Hello, friend.”

I nearly jumped out of my skin, letting out a nervous cry. But seeing that there was no immediate danger, I came to my senses quickly. “Who are you? *What* are you?”

The reflection kept quiet for a minute. The silence was unbearable. Its visage was changing, and I could see different wounds slowly surfacing on it, ranging from mere blisters to deeper cuts. The countenance changed until it almost resembled that of a war casualty. All this frightened me even more, and I roared again, almost on the verge of tears:

“Who are you?! Speak, fiend!”

“I thought you would recognize an old friend. I am you, in a way. I have come to let you know.”

“Let me know what? Do you even realize where I am?”

“Yes. A dreadful place you have gotten to, friend. Cerebrum is no place for weak minds. Or any mind whatsoever.”

“Are you calling me weak?! Some friend you turned out to be!”

“But that is what has gotten you here. You are not exactly the paragon of strength, you know.”

I did not know whether to weep, laugh, or break the mirror in two. Or all of it. My patience got the better of me, so I kept quiet and let *it* continue:



"The reason you are roaming these corridors is because you had not been the brightest mind in your time, so this is your punishment. And as you can see by my scars, I have been punished heavily as well."

"But who did this to you? Who did this to *us*?"

"*You* did."

"What?! How could I have done anything to you - I have been here for as long as I can remember! And I do not recollect any mayhem which could have damaged you. On the contrary, nothing seems to ever occur here."

"Well, yes. Because of you. *You* chose not to have any mayhem here. *You* chose slow death ... for both of us."

My 'friend' was already getting on my own nerves at this point, so I lost it: "Liar! Why would I do these things to myself?! This is not exactly an amusement park! Now stop this incessant babbling and get me out of here!"

"There is no need for such intolerable language. You have already done enough damage to me."

I was getting dizzy. I could not fully grasp what this ... thing was telling me. It continued:

"All of this was your choice. And if some of it was not, you allowed for it to happen. And since I am you, and you are me, your pathetic choices had to wreak havoc on both of us."

"What do you mean, 'my choices?' I did not choose anything, least of all to be here."

"Oh, but you did, friend. Who do you think created this edifice?"

I shuddered. "What are you saying!?"

"*You* are here because of yourself. *You* have built this cage. *You* have chosen your company. There's no one else to blame. And now you can only hope for painful expiration at the hands of those wretched spawns of your fancy. And I with you. And I hope you are happy, you self-consuming bastard."

The sudden weight of full knowledge was unbearable. The reflection was slowly starting to dissipate into nothingness, having presented to me everything I should have realized long ago. I, the sole prisoner and the warden of Cerebrum.

I felt as if something had cracked inside my head. My sanity was coming apart at the seams, and I reckoned I could hear a snapping sound at that very moment. The pressure, the silent and cold horror of this inhuman place, and then the words I had heard from my own reflection finally broke me into pieces. My mouth opened up a little, letting out a muffled sigh. The sound steadily grew into a yell, before morphing into a bloodcurdling scream. A scream which consumed the entire room. A scream which let out all that I had swallowed during the years of my bitter stay in this dam-

nable edifice, forgetting myself in the process and handing someone else the reins. One scream to end all screams.

In sudden wrath I took the blade I had found in the basement out of my pocket, and hit the mirror repeatedly with it. The glass broke in several places, and by then, both my reflection and the light above the mirror had gone. Then, not sparing a single moment, I turned and ran, ran outside the room which gave me the full extent of that unbearable knowledge. Through the corridors, down a flight of stairs, and then another, and then another, and another. While I was charging all over Cerebrum, I could hear a female voice echoing horridly throughout the edifice, followed by another one. Cackling, giggling, and shrieking simultaneously. I recognized them straight away. It seemed that my nemeses had gotten wind of my intention, even before I myself had realized what it was. Even the building itself seemed to have pierced into my mind and saw ... As if *EVERYONE* here knew but me. But it did not matter any longer: there was only one thought, one imperative in my mind: *ESCAPE*.

After what seemed to be hours, I reached ground floor and headed straight for the portals. But just as I had assumed, they were not going to give in easily. Try as I might, I could not get them to relent: feverishly pushing and pulling, trying to break one doorknob or the other, or shatter one of the glass panes, all to no avail. I had gotten so carried away that I did not notice the shadows steadily advancing behind my back. Until one of them spoke: "And just where do you think you're going?!"

My blood froze. Slowly I turned around, only to find a horde of faceless souls at the opposite end of the corridor, the souls which I had seen so many times over the years, yet which had altered themselves significantly. The jaws of each had grown, apparently, and swallowed everything else on those aimless faces; crooked but sharp teeth stuck horribly out of them. And in front of this dreadful posse were my former companions, their masks having now fallen off. Devilish fire raged in their eyes; their faces sported colossal, life-sucking grins; finally, their hands and fingers had grown disproportionately compared to the rest of their bodies, turning them into freakishly misshapen figures, a truly horrible sight to behold.

If such an encounter had happened hours before, I might have swallowed my pride and retreated. But there was no chance of turning back now. I fretted not. "Long enough have you held me in your clutches. No longer shall I bathe in your cauldron of hate! This is where you end and I begin!" The creatures laughed, the walls and corridors resounding with their ridicule.

"Do not be a fool! Those doors have not opened in ages, and no one dares open them anyway. Remember, it was you who wanted this in the first place! Now step away from those doors, and you will not suffer ... any more than necessary!" said the loud-mouth one.

"I am leaving! Whether you like it or not!"

Thus I exclaimed, and turned back toward the door, although my courage started to dwindle. These walking terrors would relegate me to an infinity of punishment if I

did not succeed, and yet none of the portals would budge ... Oh, the dire straits that I was in!

Nonetheless I pulled at the handle once more. And the edifice shook as if struck by an earthquake. A brief noise akin to a lock being unlocked followed. Regaining my nerve in a second, and feeling the loosened knob in my hand, I pulled the door open. The portal creaked horribly – yet another sound in this massive stone pile resembling the screaming of tortured souls – and the formidable winter from the outside entered the building, bringing a breath of life into a place long depleted of such matters. I felt the iciness sting my face; comforting and beautiful it was, though alien.

The abominable creaking and the subsequent entrance of the coldness sent the devilish mass into a stupor. No one had ever done this before, no one had been mad enough to exit the edifice through the front door, but one thing was certain, somebody was going to pay for such negligence of a restless soul. Upon waking from this brief catatonic state, they scattered yelping, squeaking, weeping for salvation, and curiously disappeared out of sight within moments.

I looked outward. What lay outside I knew not, nor cared. There was only one thing left to do, really.

I stepped outside. Even the Void seemed better than the cage.

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I trudged onward for hours on end, days even. Every meager notion of time seemed to have slipped away. The winds were battering my face, the inhuman cold was biting into my skin, my brows were ridden with ice, and my feet could barely withstand the frost on the ground. But at least there *was* ground. Sweet, freezing ground. I did not fall into the abyss; there was no oblivion waiting in the Void. Just another clause constructed to keep me inside. I could not see the skies due to the huge calamity the winds were creating, but at least there was some pale light from above, making it possible for me to at least keep going. Somewhere. Wherever. Mixed in with the clamor of the winds, I could discern horrible shrieks somewhere behind me, in the distance. I reckoned that the demons were facing the utmost failure of their function, and their subsequent demise. Never again would they lay claim to my soul. For the first time in a long time, I felt something. Elation, joy, or whatever it was, I could not pinpoint exactly. But for some reason, I felt as if I had done something important. Something that would do me good. A tear-ridden smile burst upon my face, unexpectedly. I reveled in hearing my demons agonizing over their lost triumph. There was no turning back, nor would there be. Whatever horror there was, lay in front of me.

And then, for some reason, the whiteness of the snow seemed to become static in front of my eyes. More and more as I walked on. Thinking at first that the blizzard might be finally subsiding, I let out a deep sigh of relief. But it was not so. Several more steps forward, and I realized that I was looking at a blank, white wall. Brick upon brick, the barrier rose skywards, ostensibly becoming curved somewhere on its way to the heavens. My initial jubilation subsided, with deep woe and unrest tak-

ing its place. I could not believe that I had not escaped at all; I had simply replaced the prison with the prison yard. I ran alongside the wall to either side, trying to find whether its threatening magnitude had any boundaries, but my efforts were in vain. The brick construction appeared to be a vast circumference around the edifice, not allowing anyone to leave or enter the wretched circle.

I fell on my knees, weeping bitterly. All those years inside, and then the delusions that I had created of being able to free myself from confinement, completely broke me down. Still distraught, kneeling, I looked back. Amidst the snow I could recognize the insurmountable edifice which had held my soul captive, still standing proudly as if mocking me. I screamed in pain, direly, the deep, intolerable suffering surfacing from my throat and into the cold air of the damned Void. The shrieks coming back to me from the edifice were no longer wrought with agony, but with derision, as if they had known all along that my soul had no future. As if only the past had ever existed; as if there were nothing more to quench my soul pining for life, for colors, for freedom; as if only they had ever been in control. Maddened with rage and anguish, I retrieved the blade lingering in my pocket ever since I had eloped from the edifice. The rusted thing appeared as if it had been waiting for my blood all this time. There had never been anything else for me in this realm, so why not experience another world, even if that world turned out to be deprived of any consciousness.

But before I could lay waste to myself, the fury within overcame me, and, turning around once more, I started thrusting the blade into the bricks. Having lost any sense of sanity, I felt I needed to punish my formidable enemy, even though the damage the wall was undergoing was barely visible. After a dozen jabs or so, one of the bricks relented; the previously smooth surface fell into pieces, revealing its hollow interior. Thrilled at this small victory, and laughing like mad, I kept striking harder and harder, until several of the surrounding bricks gave in as well. Feeling exhilarated, I initially did not notice that I had completely torn apart a few bricks, leaving a gap in the wall. I only became aware of my accomplishment once a narrow beam of blinding light came through the hole. I could not bear the light at first; after all those years in the grayness of the edifice, it was too much to handle. Yet it did not take long for me to realize that I had to continue striking the wall, until I created an opening sufficient for my whole self to go through.

As I tore at the wall, more and more light poured into what had been known as the Void, and the heat brought inside by the light created an unpleasant imbalance at first, so I stepped back, leaving the opening unobstructed. The winds and the snow subsided little by little, revealing a decimated landscape lacking any form of life whatsoever. Hereafter I could notice the edifice in all its revolting glory in the distance, as well as, vaguely, the opposite end of the dome surrounding it. But the landscape would not remain as such for long. The light entering the dome rose slowly, invading the repulsive courtyard piece by piece, before striking the building itself. The repulsive Cerebrum caught fire in a moment, the flames consuming it with startling ferocity. The edifice itself seemed to writhe in agony, contorting, screaming in a plethora of maleficent voices, before gradually morphing into a heap of ash and

rubble. The testament to soul captivity gone in no time, as if it had never been.

I observed the proceedings seated on the ground, next to the hole I had made in a desperate bout of madness, my mouth agape with disbelief. Only after the building had completely disappeared, and the effluvia emanating from its remnants had abated, did I come to my senses. I was free. The cage was now firmly a thing of the past. But what lay beyond the dome? Would this light turn me into dust just like it had done away with the edifice?

I barely even pondered these questions. I stood up, placed the blade back into my pocket, and stepped fully into the light. The sensation of warmth on my face and skin felt elevating. I felt something resembling that happiness of the days of yore, saw a multitude of colors in the light, discovered the overwhelming versatility of life beyond the dome. No longer was joy elusive. No longer did claustrophobia agitate my being. All of this and more I perceived in the infinite beauty of the light. I took one final glance at what I was about to leave behind. The sodden remains of Cerebrum lay scorched and scattered, lifeless, void, and now securely in the past. There was only one thing left to do, really.

I stepped outside. No void could compare to the light.

# Visoki zidovi Cerebruma

translated by the students

Glavni ulaz zdanja beše ogroman. Troje visokih dvokrilnih vrata, napravljenih od teškog drveta, verovatno hrastovine, oštećenih tokom dugih godina njihovog čudnog postojanja. Staklo na svim krilima beše zamagljeno, kako bi dodatno sakrilo ono što se odvajkada dešavalo vani, šta god to bilo. Naravno, bilo bi razumno reći da su vrata bila visoka metar i po, ili tri metra, ili četiri i po metra - čak i visina kao dimenzija poseduje neku konačnost. No ovaj ulaz izgledaše neodređeno visoko; isprva je delovalo kao da je gornji deo vrata bio pokriven tankom izmaglicom, da bi se u nekom delu ta izmaglica pretopila u pravu pravcatu, gustu maglu. Izgleda da niko nije znao do koje visine je išao glavni ulaz. Da, postojali su spratovi iznad prizemlja - neobjašnjivo veliki broj spratova - ali, vidite, sve tavanice u zdanju bile su nekako nejasne, neopipljive. Stoga, ulaz, čiji je gornji deo bio pod gustom maglom, nije izgledao naročito neobično. Pretpostavljam da su svi koji su bili unutra to uzimali zdravo za gotovo, te se po tome ni ja nisam izdvajao od njih. Tek mi je kasnije, nakon što je celo iskustvo postalo nepouzdana sećanje, palo na pamet da su mnoge stvari unutar zdanja bile ... neobične, da tako kažem.

Spratovi. Ni sam ne znam koliko ih je puno bilo. Naišao sam na gomilu natpisa širom zgrade: te „treći sprat“, te „trideset-treći sprat“, te „sprat 69“. Nije bilo teško zaključiti da je prokleta mesto bilo kolosalno. Ali da stvari budu još gore, isti ovi znakovi bi se pojavili na nekoliko drugih spratova, i totalno zbunili onog ko bi pokušao da ih prati. Čak se nikad ne bi našli na istim spratovima. Kao da su ovi natpisi imali noge, pa su se pomerili sa jednog sprata na drugi kad ih niko ne gleda. I nikada ne biste mogli da predvidite šta će vas zateći na nekom od tih spratova. Jednom sam nabasao na „sprat 51“, gde su neka humanoidna bića čudnog izgleda, mala, bez kose, sa velikim crnim očima, užurbano lutala hodnicima, kao da su se pojavili tu odnekud spolja, najednom, pa su tražili objašnjenje zašto im se dogodilo nešto tako čudno.

Ali strašno biste pogrešili ukoliko biste pomislili da je, ako izuzmemo takve natpise i stanovnike, uopšte bilo lako kretati se po zdanju. Svi hodnici su ličili jedan na drugi. Visoki zidovi (sa - pogađate već - maglovitim tavanicama), sive boje, ili bledožute, ili prljavobele - ne bih znao; bila je to neka nijansa koja vam je toliko oduzimala volju za životom da je zaista bilo teško utvrditi koja je to boja. Ionako niko nije ni znao koliko dugo ti zidovi stoje tu, pa nikog nije bilo briga (ili se, možebiti, niko nije usudio) da se raspituje oko kvaliteta nanete boje. Sami hodnici behu zamorno dugi, te su zbog svog jednoličnog izgleda delimično ličili na cevi. Na zidovima su, razume se, visile slike. Ličnosti koje su izgledale ili poznato ili ozloglašeno iz nekog dobrog razloga. Što ne bi predstavljalo problem da njihova lica nisu bila groteskno izobličena na razne načine. Odveć krupne oči i visoka čela, prenaplašene vilice, i skoro uvek sa nekim traumatičnim ili uzrujanim izrazom na licu. Galerija odvratnih, uznemirenih, nespokojnih.

Pošto je bilo nemoguće otkriti bilo šta o stanju stvari u okolini zgrade, razumljivo bi bilo da čovek pomisli kako na njoj nije bilo prozora. Bilo ih je. Gomila njih. Na svakom spratu, preko puta ogavne galerije slika. Ali, vidite, upravo je u tom grmu ležao zec. Zapravo niste mogli da vidite išta sa tih prozora. Delovalo je kao da napolju već vekovima divlja neka jaka oluja. Stalni vrtlozi neumorno kovitlaju stvari tamo-amo,



zaklanjajući pogled na spoljni svet. Nema zemlje, a nema ni neba. Mogao sam da se zakunem da zgrada lebdi u vazduhu. A vetrovi su jezivo zavijali, kao da nose glasove kakvih demona. Ponekad bi zvučalo kao da neka izmučena duša pokušava da se zubima probije kroz pakao. A nekada bi odzvanjalo kao hor duhova-mučenika koji traže spasenje od svojih muka. Čak i da je neko znao kako okolina zapravo izgleda, niko se nije usuđivao da napusti zgradu, strahujući da ga ne izjedu opsene što vrebahu vani.

E sad, imajte u vidu da ja nisam bio sam unutra. Postojala je velika grupa ljudi koja je lutala hodnicima. Neki od njih su mi bili jako dobro poznati, pa sam čak i kasnije uspevao da se setim njihovih lica bez većeg napora. Punačka devojka srednje visine, kovrdžave smeđe kose, i jakog, kreštavog glasa. Potom, jedna viša i vitkija devojka sa crvenom kosom do pojasa; činilo se kao da je prevrtljiva. Na kraju, bio je tu i niski momak crne boje kose sa bradom, i sposobnošću da druge dovede do ludila. Ali za svako poznato lice našlo se još desetine onih čijih lica nikako nisam mogao da se setim. Nije da se nisam trudio, razumete. Većina njih nije ni imala lice; njihova lica bejahu prazna, bez bilo kakve posebne karakteristike. Obična koža bez bilo kakvih crta, poput plastične vreće položene na gladak kamen. Povremeno bih u prolazu na nekima od njih spazio neki tračak, tračak nečega što je podsećalo na život, puls, ili nešto slično. Ali to se nije događalo često, te su oni uglavnom besciljno lutali po zgradi, gledajući slepo u slike ili nerazgovetno mrmljajući nešto sebi u bradu.

Nisam ni mogao da pretpostavim koliko dugo sam prebivao na tom mestu. Postojao je kod mene neki neuhvatljiv osećaj nekog bivstvovanja pre dolaska u zdanje, nečega što je oporo mirisalo kao ... Sreća. Živopisne boje. Raznolikost. Ali sve je to nestalo u nekom trenutku, te mi je preostalo samo da istražujem zgradu po sopstvenom nahođenju, i to mi je postalo jedina preokupacija. Često sam bio u društvu stanara koje sam najbolje poznao, mada mi je povremeno bilo neprijatno u njihovom društvu. Stvari koje su govorili često su bile zamorne, i zbog njih bih se osetio nelagodno, nesrećno, ili obeshrabreno. Mnogo puta bih zbog njih dobio napad mahnite strepnje, ili pak strašnog gneva, što me je užasavalo. Stoga sam posle nekog vremena počeo da ih izbegavam, ali nisam uspevao da ostanem sam na duže – uvek bi me pronašli, čak i u najzabačenijim uglovima zgrade. I tako sam skoro uvek bio u društvu makar jednog od njih, hteo ja to ili ne.

Tokom jednog od takvih istraživačkih pohoda, otkrio sam jednu drugačiju prostoriju na jednom od spratova. Na spratu je stajao natpis: „Nulta tačka“. Što se tiče same prostorije, vrlo brzo sam shvatio da je jedino mesto na koje me nisu pratili oni moji jogunasti družbenici, te je zato i postala moje najsigurnije utočište. Bila je to biblioteka. Nisam znao da li je to bila slučajnost ili ne, ali niko od njih nije delio moje interesovanje za pisanu reč. I uopšte nisam imao pojma zašto je neko stvorio tako veličanstvenu prostoriju pored svih onih razočaravajućih, i opskrbio je tolikim izvorima znanja kada nije bilo skoro nikog ko bi ih čitao. Police prepune tomova knjiga, tomovi prepuni reči o bilo čemu što bi vam palo na pamet.

No bilo je ipak tu i nekolicine ljudi. Svi oni su imali lica – ozbiljna, svečana, do čela zakopana u knjige. I izgleda da niko od njih nije govorio – nimalo. Štaviše, cela prostorija izgledala je prigušeno glade zvuka. Jednom prilikom sam pokušao da privu-



čem pažnju vremešnom gospodinu koji je sedeo preko puta mene; drugom prilikom sam isto pokušao sa nekolicinom duša koje su sedele oko mene. Ali nisam uspeo ni glasa da izustim; kao da su mi se reči gušile i nestajale na samim usnama. Stoga sam odustao nakon nekoliko pokušaja, pravdajući se time da mi tu nije ništa gore nego da lutam hodnicima, pa kada sam već tu, zašto ne bih u potpunosti istražio čega sve ima u ovoj čudnoj ali zadivljujućoj prostoriji? Da sam samo znao šta me tu čeka.

Tokom brojnih sati (mada su možda u pitanju bile i decenije) koje sam proveo tamo, i pored svih očaravajućih stvari koje sam našao, otkrio sam veliku knjigu na kojoj je bila napisana jedino reč „Cerebrum“. Bila je ogromna, sa više od hiljadu stranica. No kada sam rešio da je otvorim, shvatio sam da mogu da prelistam tek prvih tridesetak i nešto stranica. Ostale stranice su vidno bile čvrsto zalepljene jedna za drugu. Bez obzira, prva poglavlja behu zaista izvanrednog sadržaja. U njima se pripovedalo o nekom čudnom mestu, ne toliko drugačijem od onog na kome sam se nalazio, gde se dešavaju čudne stvari i gde vladaju neobične sile. Sile čiji je jedini cilj bio da udave izgubljene duše u ništavilu, da ih smrve dok od njih ne ostanu samo nezadovoljstvo i strepnja. Jedini način da neka očajna duša izmakne surovom bremenu jednog takvog mesta je da postane svesna, po svemu sudeći sama od sebe, strahovite tame koja nastaje boravkom tamo; tame koja u potpunosti savladava duše iznutra, prazni ih kako bi ih potom ispunili žuč i otrovna isparenja, i da bi se potom duše davile u mržnji prema sebi samima dok im ne istekne vreme. Ali čak iako duša postane svesna ove prljave igrarije, ona nikako ne može da napusti svoje okruženje, jer napolju je Praznina, ogroman nepoznati prostor; niko nikada nije iskoračio u Prazninu i potom se vratio da svedoči o tome, mada se smatra da je Praznina toliko svirepa da nijedan čovek u njoj ne može da preživi.

I tu se priča prekinula, na sredini stranice, na listu sa leve strane. Na prvi pogled činilo se da je list sa desne strane prazan, dok su ostale stranice, kao što sam već spomenuo, bile zalepljene. Međutim, kada sam malo bolje pogledao poslednju stranicu na listu sa desne strane, mogao sam da razaznam nekoliko reči, kao da je ispisana stranica bila istrgnuta iz knjige, te su tako ostali tragovi pisanja na hartiji koja se nalazila ispod. Navedene reči bile su: pobeći, prebeći, uteći, osloboditi se, bežati, uhvatiti štur, umaći. I ništa više.

Isprva, te reči nisam uzimao nimalo za ozbiljno, misleći da je to neko tu usput pribeležio u nedostatku zasebnog papira. Ni priču nisam ozbiljno shvatio. Uživao sam u njoj jer je pružala neku vrstu utehe. Naposletku, nisam se nalazio na nekom toliko strašnom mestu, zar ne? Istina, nisam imao puno prijatelja ovde, a od ovih koje sam imao sam ponekad gubio živce, ali je zato čovek mogao da iskusi razne stvari na ovom mestu. Neobična stvorenja, čudne ljude, ogromno znanje. No i reči i priča su mi se stalno vrzmali po glavi, te sam danima razmišljao o tome šta bi one mogle da znače.

Moji družbenici osetiše da nešto nije u redu, te sam im rekao za priču. Bio sam zatečen i zbunjen njihovom reakcijom. Devojka sa kovrdžavom kosom se narugala priči i podsmevala mi se zato što sam se zanosio takvim budalaštinama. Ona visoka je uradila suprotno, zasuvši me preteranim hvalospevima upućenim mojoj mašti i entuzi-

jazmu za takve stvari. Crnokosi momak je delovao vidno potreseno, ali je pokušao da ostane pribran govoreći o dobrim stranama našeg prebivališta. Njihovo ponašanje me je danima držalo u nedoumici; pitao sam se zašto bi jedna takva priča izazvala toliko burnu reakciju sa njihove strane.

I jednog dana sam shvatio. Dugo vreme, godinama, možda i decenijama, nije mi padalo na pamet da nešto nije u redu. I onda mi se sićušna misao uvukla u um: priča je opisivala mesto jako slično ovom zdanju. A šta ako su neke sile delovale ovde, sile koje su se trudile da mene zadrže unutra i da mene onesposobe po svaku cenu, tako da budem nespreman za bilo kakvo dejstvo? Ta misao se razvila u jedno sveobuhvatno otkrovenje: priča i jeste bila o ovom mestu! Ovo je bio Cerebrum! Na ovom mestu su duše odlazile u svoj neumitni kraj! Iako mi je dugo trebalo da otkrijem razlog, činjenica je bila da sam se odavno osećao pritisnuto i klaustrofobično, a razgovori sa mojim družbenicima nisu nimalo pomogli. Družbenici? Bedne produžene ruke onoga ko je vodio ovu šaradu, ko god on bio! A napisane reči? O, kako sam samo mogao biti toliko slep, i toliko dugo?! Kogod da je napisao tu knjigu, napunio je i više nego očiglednim nagoveštajima. Trebalo je pobeći, nekako, bilo kako, pre no što me u mukama bace u ništavilo. Nisam mogao da dozvolim svim tim silama da me samelju. Ali one nisu smele da saznaju za moju zamisao ... A pritom, kuda sam mogao da odem? Ako je priča bila tačna, spoljašnjost nije bila ništa manje primamljiva od unutrašnjosti. Možda bi me snašla još strašnija sudba ukoliko bih rešio da makar i kročim napolje. Pa opet, nakon što sam još malo razmišljao o sve jačem pritisku zdanja koji sam osećao, rešio sam da makar pokušam da bacim pogled na svet koji se nalazio napolju, makar me to koštalo ovog bednog života.

Mnogo je sati proteklo dok sam pokušavao da otkrijem bilo koji mogući prolaz kroz koji bih napustio zdanje, ili koji bi mi makar nagovestio nešto o spoljašnjosti zgrade, što bi me makar malo okuražilo u mom naporu da pobegnem. Brzo sam shvatio da izlaz na glavna vrata ne bi bio moguć, jer bi me sigurno primetila neka zalutala duša, a to zaista nisam želeo. Pored toga, ubedio sam sebe da su ulazna vrata teška, verovatno zaključana ili ih je makar bilo nemoguće otvoriti. Stoga sam sav svoj napor preusmerio na nalaženje bilo kakve drugačije mogućnosti. Ispitao sam svaki ćošak i svaku rupu, svako malecno ćoše na koje bih naleteo, u isto vreme pokušavajući da ostanem ravnodušan kada bih se našao u društvu svojih pratilaca, prema kojima sam jedino osećao sve veći prezir. Sasvim slučajno sam uspeo da naiđem i na nešto što je ličilo na temelje cele zgrade, nekakav podrum, gde se nalazio zasebni lavirit malih prostorija i dugih a uskih hodnika. No čak su i tamo svi prozori bili zatarabljani i zaglavljani, a sva vrata koja su me možda mogla odvesti napolje čvrsto zatvorena. Jedina korisna stvar koju sam uspeo da nađem je neko staro zarđalo sečivo, jedna gvozdена stvarčica koja je izgledala kao da uopšte ne pripada tamo. No neki glas u glavi mi je govorio da će mi zatrebati u nekom trenutku, te ga gurnuh sebi u džep, nakon što sam se pažljivo uverio da nijedne zalutale duše nije bilo u blizini. Moji pokušaji da dođem do vrha i krova zgrade pokazali su se kao nemogući zbog spratova koji su se stalno premeštali. Napetost i očajanje koje sam osećao su rasli.

I vrag će ga znati kako bi se cela ta moja kriza završila da nisam otkrio jedan sasvim novi sprat. Prostoriju, bolje rečeno. „Dvorana sopstvenog bića“. Izgledalo je kao da je ova prostrana soba obuzela ceo sprat. Ali ono što se u njoj nalazilo bilo je još čudnije. Ogledala. Stotine njih. Moram ovde reći da mi gledanje u sopstveni odraz nije bilo nepoznato. Naišao bih tu i tamo na neko staro ogledalo, širom celog zdanja. Međutim, ono što se našlo u ovoj odaji bilo je odista preterano. Neka ogledala bejahu prilično realna – reklo bi se, možda i previše. U njima sam mogao da vidim kako izgledam: fizički sam izgledao sve gore, kičma mi je popuštala, a lice i oči su mi izgledali kao u nekog starca. Druga ogledala su prikazivala iskrivljen ili pak prurušen odraz moje prilike. U njima sam, s druge strane, sebe mogao da vidim u odista raznovrsnim oblicima: ili sam puzio na rukama i nogama poput zveri, sa ogromnom čeljustima i zubima, ili, pak, bez očiju i usta; ili sam bio sveden na ogavnu pregolemu glavu; ili sam bio razjareni ludak, koji je vrištao koliko ga grlo nosi, ili sam pak bio u stanju potpunog mira. Kao što možete da pretpostavite, vrlo brzo mi je postalo neprijatno u Dvorani, ali me je još jedno iznenađenje čekalo u njenoj unutrašnjosti.

Dok sam hodao kroz prostoriju, shvatio sam da se postepeno sužava na suprotnoj strani. Izgledalo je kao da je na samom kraju sobe još jedno ogledalo, naizgled isto kao i sva ostala; međutim, svetlo na toj strani je izgleda prestalo da radi, te sam jedva uspeo da razaznam donju polovinu svog odraza dok sam se približavao ogledalu. Ali kada mu se približih, svetlo se namah upali, te ja skočih unatrag, prestravljen. Ponovo se okuraživši, opet iskoračih ka ogledalu; utvrdio sam da je to bilo još jedno obično zrcalo, te me je umirio realni prikaz mog odraza u njemu.

Moj spokoj nije potrajao zadugo. U deliću sekunde sam shvatio da se moj odraz nije pomerao uporedo sa mojim pokretima, već po svojoj volji. I pre nego što sam uspeo da reagujem na bilo koji način, ono reče:

„Zdravo, prijatelju!“

Skoro da iskočih iz svoje kože, i pritom uzrujano kriknuh. Ali videvši da nije bilo nikakve neposredne opasnosti, brzo se pribraha. „Ko si ti? Šta si ti?“

Odraz je ćutao na trenutak. Tišina je bila nepodnošljiva. Njegovo lice se menjalo, te sam primetio kako se na njemu polako pojavljuju različite rane, od običnih plikova do dubljih posekotina. Lice se menjalo toliko da je naposletku skoro podsećalo na kakvog ratnog ranjenika. Sve me je ovo još više zastrašilo, te sam ponovo urliknuo, skoro na ivici suza:

„Šta si ti?! Zbori, zlotvore!“

„Mislio sam da ćeš prepoznati starog prijatelja. Ja sam ti, na neki način. Došao sam da te obavestim.“

„Šta da me obavestiš? Shvataš li uopšte gde se nalazim?“

„Da. Na strašnom si mestu završio, prijatelju. Cerebrum nije mesto za slabe umove. Ili bilo kakve umove, zapravo.“

„Nazivaš li me slabićem?! I ti si mi neki prijatelj!“

„Ali upravo te je to i dovelo ovde. Nisi baš neki dobar primer jakog čoveka, znaš.“

Nisam znao da li da plačem, da se smejem, ili da prepolovim ogledalo. Ili pak sve ovo. Moje strpljenje je prevagnulo, pa ne reko ništa i pustih ga da nastavi:

„Razlog zbog kojeg tumaraš ovim hodnicima je zato što nisi baš bio najbistriji kada je trebalo, te si ovako kažnjen. A kao što možeš da zaključiš po mojim ožiljcima, ni mene nisu poštedeli.“

„Ali ko ti je ovo učinio? Ko nam je ovo učinio?“

„Ti.“

„Molim?! Kako sam mogao bilo šta tebi da učinim - ovde sam otkad znam za sebe! I ne sećam se nikakvog meteža koji je mogao da ti naudi. Naprotiv, izgleda kao da se ovde ništa nikad i ne događa.“

„Pa da. Zbog tebe. Ti si taj koji je izabrao da ovde ne bude nikakvog meteža. Ti si izabrao sporu smrt ... za nas obojicu!“

U ovom trenutku mi je „prijatelj“ već išao na živce, pa sam mu odbrusio: „Lažovčino! Zašto bih sebi uradio ovako nešto?! Ovo mesto baš i nije zabavni park! Te prekini da verglaš naširoko i vadi me odavde!“

„Nema potrebe za tako nesnosnim jezikom. Već si me dovoljno osakatio.“

Vrtelo mi se u glavi. Nisam uspevaio u potpunosti da shvatim šta mi je ova ... stvar govorila. Nastavio je:

„Sve ovo bio je tvoj izbor. A ako nešto od toga i nije bilo, onda si ti dozvolio da se to desi. A pošto sam ja ti, a ti ja, tvoje jadne odluke su obojicu upropastile.“

„Kako to misliš 'moje odluke?' Nisam odlučio ništa, a ponajmanje od svega da budem ovde.“

„O, ali baš jesi, prijatelju. Šta misliš, ko je stvorio ovo zdanje?“

Stresao sam se. „Šta hoćeš da kažeš?“

„Ti si ovde zbog samog sebe. Ti si sagradio ovaj kavez. Ti si izabrao svoje društvo. Niko drugi ne može biti kriv zbog toga. I sada možeš samo da očekuješ bolni svršetak za koji će se postarati oni pogani izrodi tvoje mašte. A s tobom i ja. I nadam se da si srećan zbog toga, ti prokleti dželate što samom sebi glavu na panj stavlja!“

Težina istine koju sam naprasno otkrio u celosti bila je neizdrživa. Odraz je polako počeo da se rasipa i stapa sa ništavilom, nakon što mi je predstavio sve ono što je trebalo da shvatim odavno. Ja, jedini zatvorenik i upravnik Cerebruma.

Osetio sam kao da mi je nešto puklo u glavi. Moj razum je pucao po šavovima, te mislim da sam baš u tom trenutku i čuo zvuk pucanja. Taj pritisak, ta nema, hladna

strava tog neljudskog mesta, a potom i reči koje sam čuo od sopstvenog odraza konačno su me slomili u paramparčad. Usta mi se malo otvoriše, i iz njih izlete potmuo uzdah. Glas se postepeno pretvorio u viku, dok se nije preobrazio u vrisak od koga se ledila krv u žilama. Vrisak koji je progutao celu sobu. Vrisak kojim sam iz sebe izbacio sve ono što sam progutao tokom svog dugogodišnjeg gorkog boravka u tom gnusnom zdanju, boravka tokom kog sam potpuno zaboravio na sebe i drugom preustio uzde. Vrisak od koga će skončati svi vriskovi.

U napadu gneva koji me beše obuzeo izvadih sečivo koje sam našao u podrumu, te stadoh da njime udaram u ogledalo bez prestanka. Staklo se polomilo na nekoliko mesta; dotad su već potpuno nestali i moj odraz i svetlo iznad ogledala. Zatim, ne časeći ni časa, okrenuo sam se i potrčao, potrčao iz sobe koja mi je otkrila ono što bih rado da je ostalo sakriveno. Kroz hodnike, niz stepenište, pa još jedno, pa još jedno, i još jedno. Dok sam jurišao kroz Cerebrum, načuo sam ženski glas koji je odzvanjao kroz zdanje, a potom i još jedan. U isti mah su se cerekale, kikutale, i vrištale. Odmah sam ih prepoznao. Biće da su moji krvnici shvatili moju nameru, čak i pre nego što sam je ja sam shvatio. Kao da je i sama zgrada pronikla u moj um i videla ... Kao da su SVI ovde znali sem mene. Ali više nije bilo ni važno, na umu mi je bila samo jedna misao, samo jedna zapovest: POBEĆI.

Nakon što su naizgled protekli brojni sati, stigao sam do prizemlja i odmah se uputio ka glavnim vratima. Ali kao što sam već i pretpostavio, nisu htela tek tako da popuste. Koliko god pokušavao, nisam nikako uspevao da ih olabavim: grozničavo sam ih gurao i vukao, pokušao da pololim neku kvaku, ili makar da slomim neki od staklenih panela, ali bez uspeha. Toliko sam se zaneo da nisam ni primetio kako mi se senke polagano približavaju iza leđa. Dok jedna od njih nije progovorila: „A kuda ti misliš da si krenuo?!“

Krv mi se sledila u žilama. Polako sam se okrenuo, i ugledao hordu bezličnih duša na suprotnom kraju hodnika, onih duša kojih sam se toliko nagledao tokom godina, ali koje su sada vidno izgledale drugačije. Svakoju su očevidno porasle vilice, koje kao da su proždrale sve ostalo na tim besciljnim licima; krivi ali oštri zubi su im jezivo štrčali iz njih. A na čelu ove grozne potere behu moji nekadašnji družbenici, sada bez ikakvih maski. U očima im je besnela đavolska vatra; svojim kolosalnim kezom na licima isisavali su sav život iz prostorije; naposletku, ruke i prsti su im postali toliko nesrazmerno veći od ostatka tela da su izgledali kao kakve groteskne i nakazne figure - zaista ogavan prizor za oči.

Da se ovakav prizor odigrao samo nekoliko sati ranije, možda bih progutao svoj ponos i povukao se. Ali sada nije bilo nikakve šanse da ću se vratiti. Nisam ni ustuknuo. „Dovoljno dugo ste me držali u svojim kandžama. Nikada više neću upasti u vaš kazan mržnje. Ovde se vi završavate a ja tek počinjem!“ Kreature su se smejele; zidovi i hodnici su odjekivali njihovim podsmehom.

„Nemoj biti budala! Ta vrata se nisu otvarala vekovima, i niko se ionako ne usuđuje da ih otvori. Seti se, prvenstveno si ti sam želeo ovo! A sada odstupi od tih vrata, i nećeš se mučiti ... ne više nego što je neophodno!“ reče ona galamdžijka.

„Odlazim! Svidelo se to vama ili ne!“

Ovako sam uzviknuo, i okrenuo se opet ka vratima, mada je moja hrabrost počela da nestaje. Ovi hodajući užasi bi me osudili na večnu kaznu ukoliko sad ne bih uspeo, ali nijedno od krila ulaznih vrata nije htelo da se pokrene ... Jao, u kakvom sam se škripcu našao!

Pa ipak, ponovo sam povukao ručicu. I zdanje se zatreslo kao da ga je pogodio zemljotres. Potom se začu kratak šum – kao da se neka brava otključala. Povrativši hrabrost za tili čas, i osetivši kako je popustila kvaka u mojoj ruci, otvorio sam vrata. Zaškripala su užasno – još jedan zvuk u ovoj ogromnoj gomili kamenja koji je podsećao na vrištanje izmučenih duša – i zastrašujuća zima koja vladaše napolju uvuče se u zgradu, sobom unoseći dašak života u mesto u kojem tako nečeg dugo nije bilo. Osetio sam kako mi mraz štipa lice; osećaj beše utešan i divan, iako mi je bio nepoznat.

Od gnusnog škripanja, kao i ulaska hladnoće koji je usledio, vraška gomila ostade na mestu ukočena. Niko ranije ovo nije uradio, niko nije bio toliko lud da kroz glavni ulaz napusti zdanje, ali jedna stvar beše sigurna: neko će platiti za ovakav nemar glade jedne nemirne duše. Nakon što se prenuše iz ovog kratkog katatoničnog transa, rasuše se kevući, cvileći, tražeći spas u jecajima, i na čudesan način, za svega nekoliko trenutaka, nestadoše iz mog vidokruga.

Pogledao sam napolje. Nisam znao šta se nalazi napolju, niti sam mario za to. Trebalo je samo još jednu stvar učiniti, zapravo.

Iskoračih napolje. Od onog kaveza mi je i Praznina izgledala bolje.

\*\*\*

Satima, ako ne i danima, teškim sam korakom išao. Izgledalo je kao da mi je nestao i najslabiji osećaj za vreme. Vetrovi su mi šibali lice, nečovečna hladnoća mi je nagrizala kožu, na obrvama mi se nahvatalo inje, a stopala su mi jedva podnosila mraz na tlu. Ali makar je postojalo tlo. Dražesno, zamrznuto tlo. Nisam pao u ambis; nikakvo ništavilo me nije čekalo u Praznini. Bila je to samo još jedna klauzula sastavljena da me zadrži unutra. Nisam mogao da vidim nebo od silnog meteža koji su stvarali vetrovi, ali makar je bilo nekog bledog svetla koje se spuštalo odozgo, koje mi je barem omogućavalo da nastavim da se krećem. Negde. Kud god. Kroz galamu vetrova mogao sam da razlučim stravične krike negde iza sebe, u daljini. Delovalo mi je kao da se demoni suočavaju sa potpunim neuspehom svoje uloge u celoj priči, kao i sa sopstvenom propašću. Nikada više neće polagati pravo na moju dušu. Po prvi put nakon dužeg vremena, osetih nešto. Ushićenje, radost, šta god da je bilo, nisam mogao tačno da odredim. Ali iz nekog razloga, osećao sam se kao da sam učinio nešto važno. Nešto što bi bilo dobro po mene. Suzama optočen osmeh mi je izbio na licu, neočekivano. Zabavljao sam se slušajući svoje demone u agoniji zbog trijumfa koji im je izmakao iz ruku. Nije bilo povratka nazad, niti će ga biti. Ma kakvi god užasi me tek čekali.



A onda, iz nekog razloga, delovalo je kao da snežna belina prestaje da se miče pred mojim očima. Sve više i više kako sam išao napred. Pomislivši isprva da se mećava možda konačno smiruje, duboko uzdahnuh sa olakšanjem. Ali ne beše tako. Nakon što sam načinio još par koraka, shvatio sam da gledam u jednoličan, beo zid. Sastavljena od gomile cigala, barijera se uzdizala ka nebu, prividno se kriveći negde usput do tih istih nebesa. Moja prvobitna radost je utihnula, a njeno mesto su zauzeli težak jad i nemir. Nisam mogao da poverujem da zapravo uopšte nisam pobegao; samo sam izašao iz zgrade zatvora u njegovo dvorište. Trčao sam uz zid u oba smera, pokušavajući da otkrijem da li je bilo kraja njegovoj pretećoj veličini, ali uzalud. Po svemu sudeći, ova konstrukcija od cigala okruživala je zdanje u širokom luku; zbog nje nije bilo moguće da bilo ko napusti ili pak uđe u ovaj bedni krug.

Zaplakavši gorko, pao sam na kolena. Sve te godine provedene unutra, a potom i moja zabluda da mogu da uspem da se oslobodim zatočeništva, potpuno su me slo-mile. I dalje uzrujan i na kolenima, pogledah iza sebe. Sred snega sam prepoznao nesavladivo zdanje koje mi je držalo dušu zatočenom; i dalje je ponosno stajalo, kao da mi se ruga. Vrisnuo sam bolno, očajnički; moja duboka, nepodnošljiva patnja izbijala mi je iz grla direktno u hladan vazduh te uklete Praznine. Urlicima koji su dopirali do mene iz zdanja više nije vladala agonija, već poruga, kao da su sve vreme znali da nema budućnosti za moju dušu. Kao da je uvek postojala samo prošlost; kao da nije bilo ničeg drugog što bi utolilo žeđ moje duše koja je vapila za životom, za bojama, za slobodom; kao da su oni bili jedini koji su me oduvek kontrolisali. Razjaren od besa i muke, izvukao sam sečivo iz džepa u kom se nalazilo još od mog bekstva iz zdanja. Izgledalo je kao da je ova zarđala stvarčica sve ovo vreme iščekivala moju krv. Nikada nije bilo ničega drugog za mene na ovom mestu, te zašto onda ne bih iskusio neki drugi svet, pa makar me taj svet lišio bilo kakve svesti?

Ali pre no što sam uspeo da naudim sebi, iznutra me je obuzeo bes; okrenuvši se još jednom prema zidu, počeo sam da zabadam sečivo u cigle. Pošto sam potpuno izgubio razum, osećao sam potrebu da kaznim svog zastrašujućeg neprijatelja, iako je šteta koju sam pričinjavao zidu bila jedva primetna. Nakon što sam zamahnuo desetak puta, jedna cigla je popustila; nekada glatka, njena površina se razbila u komade, otkrivši pritom unutrašnju šupljinu. Oduševljen ovom majušnom pobedom, i smejući se kao ludak, udarao sam sve jače i jače, dok nije popustilo i nekoliko susednih cigli. Osetivši se uzbuđeno, isprva nisam primetio da sam nekoliko cigli rasturio u potpunosti, što je napravilo pukotinu u zidu. Postao sam svestan onoga što činim tek kada je kroz rupu prošao tanak snop zaslepljujuće svetlosti. Najpre nisam mogao da podnesem svetlost; bilo je prejako za mene nakon svih tih godina provedenih u sivilu zdanja. Ali mi nije trebalo dugo da shvatim da treba da nastavim sa udaranjem po zidu dok ne napravim dovoljno veliki otvor da ceo prođem kroz njega.

Dok sam tako lomio zid, sve više i više svetlosti prodiralo je u ono što se zvalo Prazninom, a toplota spoljašnosti koju je donela svetlost stvorila je čudnu struju toplog i hladnog, pa sam se sklonio od otvora. Vetrovi i sneg su malo po malo počeli da je-njavaju, te otkriše razoreni pejzaž u kome nije bilo baš nikakvog oblika života. Nakon toga sam u daljini mogao da vidim zdanje u svoj njegovoj odvratnoj sili i slavi, kao



i, mada nejasno, suprotni kraj kupole koja ga je okruživala. Ali predeo nije ostao takav zadugo. Svelost koja je ulazila kroz kupolu se lagano podizala, osvajajući odurno dvorište deo po deo, dok nije udarila u samu zgradu. Ogavni Cerebrum se za tili čas zapalio; plamenovi su ga gutali na zapanjujuće svirep način. Izgledalo je kao da se samo zdanje grči u agoniji, kao da se krivi i jauče u horu zlokobnih glasova, pre nego što se postepeno pretvorilo u hrpu pepela i šuta. Ovaj spomen ropstvu duše nestade za tren oka, kao da ga nikad nije ni bilo.

Dok se sve ovo dešavalo, ja sam sedeo na zemlji, tik do rupe koju sam načinio u očajničkom napadu ludila, i posmatrao otvorenih usta, u neverici. Došao sam sebi tek kada je zgrada potpuno nestala, i nakon što su izvetrela isparenja koja su se dizala sa njenih ostataka. Bio sam slobodan. Taj kavez je sada u potpunosti bio stvar prošlosti. Ali šta se nalazilo van kupole? Da li će i mene ova svetlost pretvoriti u prah na isti način na koji je uklonila zdanje?

Skoro i da nisam razmišljao o ovim pitanjima. Ustao sam, vratio sečivo u džep, i istupivši, pustio da me svetlost u celini obasja. Osećaj topline na mom licu i koži učinio je da se osetim uzvišeno. Osetio sam nešto što me je podsetilo na onu sreću minulih dana, video bezbroj boja u toj svetlosti, i otkrio preplavljujuću raznovrsnost života van kupole. Više mi radost nije bila nedostižna. Više mi klaustrofobija nije tresla biće. Sve sam ovo, a i mnogo više, spoznao u beskonačnoj lepoti svetlosti. Još jednom sam bacio pogled na ono što sam ostavljao iza sebe. Raskvašeni ostaci Cerebruma ležahu spaljeni i rasuti, beživotni, prazni, i sada bezbedno smešteni u prošlost. Trebalo je zapravo učiniti još samo jednu stvar.

Iskoračih napolje. Nikakva praznina se ne može meriti sa svetlošću.

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