

Excerpt one

I've started earlier than usual, I can write by the light of dusk rather than my lamp. It's not unpleasant, and even I can't deny the beauty of a setting sun.

Last night's misadventures resulted in the acquisition of the curious object that now lies at the foot of my desk. I trick myself that there is life in the night, that something deep within the concentric shells of my mind is connected with this place. But I suspect that even during my nocturnal excursions familiarity still holds its sway— I pathetically veer toward objects hewn to my routine. I am drawn to the old in general, to objects caked with so much history that I think some sort of synthesis must have occurred within the eddies of surging time. But no, they sit there dull and lifeless; the museum and its contents are no exception.

The building is equipped with a vast basement that functions as its storeroom. Half of the repository is ordered and catalogued as you would expect but the other half is a labyrinth of junk the establishment has harboured for too long. I know every detail of the cluttered section too, unfortunately. Out of habit, I had been patrolling the basement when I caught sight of something in the corner of my eye. Something new. It was a violin with a certain distinction: a length of twine attached to the back of its neck and hung semi-taut against the curves of the body before disappearing furtively into the left f-hole. How? When? Like layers of sediment, the deeper you foraged in the clutter, the older the pickings were. So what was something new doing here? It's difficult to explain my impulses at the best of times, not least when I'm half asleep and the back of my head is throbbing at the behest of the Moon. It smelt of mystery. So I took it.

I walked home. The oppressive aspect of the structures of central Corpress was enhanced by the backdrop of moonlight, transforming them into immense black monoliths. Shafts of light cut across the cobblestone bordering the Canal at regular-ish intervals, guided by the many alleys that branched away like capillaries penetrating the meat of the city. The odd fox flitted in and out of view. The smoothness and soundlessness of the foxes' rhythmic disappearing act fooled me that there might be comfort in the perfect dark. I often imagine the night insulating me like a soft cloak, but the reality is only desolation and the pitiless touch of cold. I feel a certain kinship with them now, they scurry; I know their fear. But my feeling is tempered by the knowledge that they have a fraternity to return to.

I groped and struggled at the door of the block to which my apartment belonged, allowing what I think was a rat to follow me inside. I didn't switch the lights on to check. I don't want anyone to know about the nonsense I get up to at night.

Eventually, I made it to my room. Instrument in hand, I pulled gently on the twine but the papery payload and f-hole were not readily compatible. I pulled a little harder and the letter slipped through the gap and into my hands with gratifying, granular friction. The envelope was still attached to the precarious umbilical cord that had gilded the violin with its sheen of pregnant promise. It was entirely embossed and clearly very old; the various depressions having each collected a share of grime.

I continued to examine the envelope for a few minutes more. I touched it to my face, smelt its stale odour, and then proceeded to my desk to labour in purgatory.

Excerpt two

It's getting worse, I've been seeing things for a while but nothing yet so lurid as yesterday evening. Tonight, writing takes on the deadly-serious function of catharsis.

It's Wednesday for twenty minutes more... I had an appointment with a friend of mine. His dismal nature means I have to keep him at arm's length, but I see him when I can stomach it. Location is the other thing; he's situated in the heart of Corpress' barbarous Gorpstry district, and on the way, I always have to make careful efforts not to slip in the physical and proverbial shit.

His house is a detached two-bedded affair with an overgrown front and back garden. Its red brick is solid, but here and there is displayed the handiwork of bored delinquents. That evening I stumbled through his waist-high, rusted, creaking iron gate, slipped through the searching arms of a few weeds and unkempt bushes to find my way to the flakey, feeble cream-paint knocker of Berellion's front door. Things couldn't have been more mundane but I couldn't shake the feeling I was heading toward something... inauspicious. I knocked. "Coming!" Was the answer but I knew better; the fastest I've ever made the stride from doorstep to hall at Berel's was ten minutes and I was prepared for thirty. I waited seven minutes, knocked again and heard the same statement of intent. Seven minutes more and to my surprise, my useless friend opened the door. Berellion has black hair and sallow skin, grey eyes, and a sharp, largeish nose with a trace of a hook. At that

moment a faint grin adorned his face. 'Someone seems happy' I probed, 'Well, you know, progress, I guess.' said Berel evasively. He showed me into his living room at the back of the house.

Berel sat me down with a coffee and eventually got comfortable himself. 'Have you heard about this Grott business?' I ignored him but I knew he would babble regardless— 'An entire City, inhabitants, historical identity, appear out of thin air, crazy stuff—.' I glanced toward the photos on Berel's mantelpiece. I couldn't really see them from where I was sitting but I knew a few of them— the two of us together at graduation, his dead German Shepherd. They traced the path of Berel's life; a photo of the two of us taken while travelling around the Middle East marked an abrupt end to the story. Shortly thereafter Berel became the beneficiary of a significant inheritance that removed pressure from his life, but, the way I see it, has resulted in the useless individual I know now.

'You're miles away, Terry, and you look awful.' I took a sip of coffee, which was excellent, although I'm no aficionado.

'I've been thrashing about at night for a while now.'

'As in sleeping?'

'No.'

'How's work? Any drama?'

'All the drama happened centuries ago.'

Reading what I've just written, it's hard to understand how Berel and I manage to pass the time together, but we do. I knew the 'business' he mentioned— recently, a city situated in the heart of the country that called itself Grott announced itself to the rest of the world. I asked: 'Do you know anyone who's been? To Grott that is.'

'Well, the news only broke a few days ago, but I think Peter is planning to have a gander.' Peter, now there's an irritating individual. I was reminded of that inauspicious feeling. The three of us lived together at Uni.

'Peter? What's the latest fad?' Peter is glib and a dilettante. I detest glibness, and dilettantism is an understandable but irritating affliction.

'I haven't seen him in a little while. Last I heard, he was interested in the restoration of oil paintings.'

'Oil painting. What have you been looking at recently?' At this point Berel got up, initiating an ancient and well-worn rite between friends; I got up, and as we started walking we relaxed into the patter of conversation specific to the two of us.

'I've been trying to pin down what it is in a contemporary artist I've recently come across that I find reminiscent of the 15th-century master, Tromso.' On our way into the kitchen, Berel plucked a catalogue from the bookcase in his hall, opened it to a choice page, and handed it to me. And that's how we passed the time for another hour— stood in Berel's kitchen, eating his cheese and talking about painting; we had a fried-egg sandwich each. But I was still uneasy, and I knew something was going to happen, that I wouldn't be home on time.

I noticed it getting darker when I followed Berel's gaze out into his overgrown garden. 'I really should clean that up, I used to like gardening.' I caught the wistful note in his voice.

'How have you been, Berel.' I wonder whether he heard any reluctance in my voice?

'I've not been too bad, been hammering away at the local histories. I'm not sure why. Corpress has an extremely rich history you know.'

Immediately regretting the question: 'I know, Berel, you've told me and I knew before you told me, but what about a job? Or a direction? Or activity? Or fun even?

'Well....'

'Well, what?' Berel was silent.

I sighed softly and asked 'Can I use your bathroom?'

'Yes, of course, you know the way.'

To my eyes, Berel's house is a pretty thing, at least from the inside. I like wood a lot and the misshapen individuality of hand-crafted things. Not an original opinion, I know, but the house is abundant in such things. I'm particularly partial to the house's exposed wooden rafters.

I wish, sometimes with all my heart, that my friend would find his way; the absurd thing is that virtually all the accusations implicit in the questions I put to Berel could be levelled at me. The feelings of concern I felt while climbing his stairs were being overtaken again. The feelings that things around me were being meddled with were gaining power.

Midway through taking a piss, I heard the very brief metallic, scraping sound of an impact and swivelled my head toward it. A sickle! Lodged deep in the wall of the bathroom to my right. The blade was coated in a kind of black rust, it was an extreme black, close to the total absence of light. The wood cladding

of the sickle's handle had shattered and the bits lay on the ground. I started toward it but was interrupted by a sharp rapping below me. It was only the door, someone had arrived apparently. I looked back at the sickle, but nothing was there. I assumed it was sleep-related and after finishing up I made for the stairs to see what was up.

Halfway down the stairs, I saw Berel enter the hall and wondered in frustration at why he'd been able to attend to this visitor so quickly. I got to the bottom as he opened the door to reveal Peter stood at the step in his posh-boy way— Peter had his hands in suit pockets, weight on his back leg, front leg bent at the knee, and back foot perpendicular to his front foot.

'Good to see you, Peter.' Said Berel warmly.

'What's up chaps' Somehow he managed to drawl even a phrase as terse as that. He flicked his long blonde hair as he glanced at me and smirked, 'Fancy seeing you here, Terry.'

'Well, I *am* friends with Berel.'

'Hush, Terry, this works perfectly.'

Peter waved three tickets at us. 'There's a show on tonight, boys. Sounds quaint, we'll go to the strip club after.'

'Sure we will. Who couldn't go?' I asked provocatively.

'Don't be a sourpuss. Come on, I'll book us a taxi.'

We went to the opera. I hate opera. I let myself be taken rather than choosing to go, something that happens far too often. Our journey perfectly hit the join of dusk and night. With the shifting of the sky as we headed to town, came that same inauspicious feeling, revived and reinvigorated, the feeling we were surging deeper and deeper into something dangerous and vibrant. More and more bottles and broken glass were evident in the streets of Corpress the closer we got to its heart; no doubt we have a drinking problem. I use the word 'heart' rather than 'centre' because I started to feel in my bones that something was beating in this city. The violin, the head, the sickle, the disconcerting change in the character of my daydreams, and what I would experience that evening point to something I don't yet understand.

'How've you been, Peter? How's Celia?

'Who's Celia?'

'The girl you were with last I saw you, we went for—' the chatter bounced off my awareness as if there were twelve layers of polystyrene encasing me. An urge to stop the taxi, get out, and go home started to take hold of me but was quickly subdued by a newly awoken influence. We turned a corner; I saw the Stille Theatre, the beating heart, and it beckoned...

I remember feeling like I was being pumped through the theatre's atrium into its various cavities and ducts, that the process was unpleasant. But when I assumed my seat, I suddenly felt like I'd stepped out of my front door and fallen straight into the theatre's comfortable crimson fabric, that all the intervening moments had simply been deleted. I read the programme:

'The Youth of Herûs' is based on the opus (and Corpress' most famous export) of the legendary writer known as 'The fool'— 'The Shell of the Youth of Herûs'. This towering achievement in prose poetry details a semi-mythical version of the mysterious events surrounding the disappearance of the youngest son of house Herûs. The boy meets three ambitious spirits and impresses them with his imagination and energy. They concoct a plan to construct an engine—for which the boy's soul would be the catalyst—with the ability to recombine the wasted metaphysical energies of the Corpress region into forces and influences.

The programme hit a nostalgic nerve; I've thought about producing my own personal translation. I drowsily noted the lights going down and the curtains going up, but what happened thereafter is difficult for me to relate. It was mesmerising; I'd seen nothing like it. Each movement was sublime, every voice was the ideal timbre, and every phrase was perfectly executed. The choreography and stage direction seemed to channel the essence of The Fool's masterwork. But towards the end of the first act, I began to recognise the feeling that I had as reality, that there was yet more to this production. Occasionally, shafts of coloured light decorated the performance, and a sourceless, soft glow seemed to emanate from the centre of the stage.

We broke for the interval. Peter wormed his way into conversation with some minor political dignitaries and, prosecco in hand, smashed out his best platitudes: 'Wonderful, such sincerity!', 'I really empathise with the boy.' So I asked him— 'What exactly do you empathise with, Peter?' Peter flashed me a nervous grin—'The child in me empathises as I suspect it does in all of us'— but he knew I'd keep making things difficult for him so he disappeared to mingle alone.

In the second act, the vividness only increased. With every blink, I saw more, awakened (or I fell into a deeper sleep?) to new elevations of experience. The auditorium's roof disappeared and echelon after echelon of galleries and box seats were piled on top of the walls of the theatre for many hundreds of metres

upwards. The new layers bloomed with winged things, and the nascent light show from act one had been built into a subtle and all-encompassing augmentation of the on-stage action. The creatures who progressively gained in detail and colour, as more of this canvas was filled out, seemed to be arranged in order of squalor: lowest and closest to the action were the cleanest and most angelic and highest and furthest away were the dirtiest and ugliest. They were absolutely transfixed by the show, no doubt about it.

Still, there was more— during the third act, I was gazing up at the crisscrossing shafts of light when I noticed a network of taut, quivering strings glistening with reflected glory, and then a five-limbed thing materialised upon them. It was quickly apparent that this was the true conductor. It danced on and plucked at the nexus of strings with extraordinary dexterity. It was about sixty metres directly above the stage, and... every participant in the show had a string bound to the nape of his or her neck. Time seemed to slow; there was a drop in the music. Anticipation and terror strangled me. The spider-puppeteer clasped a particular thread between its hind legs, paused for a moment and then began to rub the string. Each rub was a distinct, perfect oscillation and produced a wobble, the wobbles collected at a point below the spider's legs for a time. Eventually, it stopped and the globule of sound started its silent, interminable passage to the skull of the performer playing the boy. I turned to Berel on my right, he was fixed on the stage action, enthralled but oblivious to the show's occult aspect. So I sought corroboration in his eye instead, for the play of the reflected light show, for the winged creatures. I desperately hoped I'd find nothing. All were present. I turned back to the performance; the globule met its mark and, from what seemed like another dimension, the actor of the boy summoned a high and low note simultaneously. It was appalling. The noise was so dense that it seemed to flood the theatre. He closed his mouth but for me, the sound continued to gather force from within.