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Translation of View from the Ossuary by Antoine Volodine

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Translation of *View from the Ossuary* by Antoine Volodine

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

by

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Abstract

This is a literary translation from the French of Antoine Volodine's *Vue sur l'ossuaire*. Additional creative embellishments have been included in the form of translator's notes and epigraphs in order to enhance the fictive reality of the work.

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ANTOINE VOLODINE

VIEW FROM THE OSSUARY

romãnce

Translated from the French by J.T. Mahany

[PUBLISHER'S IMPRINT]

“I is another.”

—Arthur Rimbaud, *Letter to Georges Izambard*

Translator's Note: The reader may notice discrepancies between the modern accepted taxonomic system and classifications appearing in the text. Toucans belong to the suborder *pici*, while *picoides* is a genus of woodpecker. The epigraphs do not appear in Volodine's original work, but are my own contribution in order to add a new layer of artifice to the romance. A translation possesses an existence as a literary object that extends beyond being merely the echo of a distant song. For best results, read before sleeping.

I

Maria

She got up. One of her passports said her name was Maria Samarkande. This was also the identity recorded in the minutes. She leaned against the wall, the one adjoining an air duct. The conduit opened its multiple mouths and ears into every ground-floor room, whether a cell, a store, or an office. Besides blasts of air, it carried cries of pain, howls of pain and shame, but at that moment, only the feeble whispering of air currents could be heard. She pressed her weakened hands, her dirty fingers, against the wall and stroked the granules of concrete. She felt around with caution. She wanted to verify that her nerve endings still functioned. Her palms were covered in scrapes. Pain spread throughout her entire body. Her legs trembled, her skeleton began to shudder, then she went still. The concrete was freezing. On the leatherette chair placed on the other side of the door, the guard was asleep. She could hear his regular, gargled breathing, almost a snore. Everything seemed calm. A simple, nocturnal atmosphere reigned in the Manuela Aratuípe detention center, the military school to which she had been taken, three weeks ago, so she could shed light on what had been her existence, her convictions and loves, and to make her speak of what, ultimately, had disappointed her, and who she had lied to, and for how long, and why she had chosen to lie in books rather than elsewhere. The lightbulb emitted a yellow glow. It never turned off. It spread a piss-like, unaggressive, light, and, once one accepted that no restorative darkness would follow, one could get used to it. Maria Samarkande closed her eyes then opened them again. She was inclined to think that it was the night between Friday and Saturday, but her plunge into somnolence had made her lose her bearings. It might have been Saturday evening. The referent leading the interrogation, alternating with a man who wore a jacket and pilot boots, had left the room and not yet been replaced. The Air Force officer had not suddenly appeared after a minute, like he usually did, with his look of indecipherable politeness and, under his elbow, the outline of statements passed from one inquisitor to the other. This break was the first in the session of monologues and dialogues that had begun on Wednesday, and Maria Samarkande was unable to calculate how much time had passed, since she had taken advantage of it to

stretch out on the ground, falling asleep almost immediately. And now, in the silence, she speculated on what was to come. Perhaps someone was going to take her back to her cell; perhaps the inquiry was going to suddenly begin again. The referent had taken the chair. All that remained of the furniture was a table and a bucket. The lightbulb illuminated in yellow the austere space, the windowless walls, the ceiling and the floor and their appalling cellblock grayness. In one corner was a tiny sink that resembled a urinal, with, just above, a spigot connected to a rubber pipe. The pipe hung toward the ground, toward a grated hole through which water could drain. The grate was detached, it was about ten centimeters in diameter, and, in a pinch, it could be used as a weapon, increasing the strength of a punch. The rubber pipe also could have been wielded by a fighter, a specialist in hand-to-hand combat, to strangle the guard. His snoring had stopped. Maria Samarkande dismissed the images of an escape she knew was impossible and concentrated on a humble mental activity that had often helped her in difficult times. She slowly enumerated the seconds. She counted to thirty-one, thirty-two. The guard's breath grew loud again. Maria Samarkande once more closed her eyes. She was hurt, she was hungry, her mouth was incredibly dry, her brain and eye sockets were gripped by a vise. Nausea loomed. Her desire to vomit diminished whenever she lowered her eyelids and maintained a strict immobility. The guard's persistent slumber confirmed that it was night. There was usually unrest until around midnight, comings and goings, the sounds of voices. Now the office behind the door had succumbed to lethargy. No one was typing on one of those half-sheets of copy paper some element or holding another of those interminable and sometimes odious conversations near the sink or the table. The referent or the Air Force officer had gone out to write syntheses of her declarations which they would soon come back to make her sign, before continuing the interrogation from a position that would appear justified by the new clarification, but which, in reality, hopelessly falsified and exaggerated everything that had been said. The questioner would bring back the chair, place the cardboard folder on the table, sit down, open the folder, and invite Maria Samarkande to append her signature under three lines

which would therefore push her ever closer toward confessions where not a single sentence exactly corresponded to the truth as her memory recorded or imagined it. She would sign and, sometimes, contest the interpretation that had been made of her words. The referent would try to convince her not to waste her time on trivial details, he would grow angry, accuse her of retraction, and, when she persisted, he would go to the door that was never locked and bring in nearby soldiers, along with, possibly, one or two other plainclothes characters, eyes red with insomnia and sadism, and order a heightened interrogation. Inside the dossier were accumulated pages stained with sweat, transcriptions of shouts. However, and even though Maria Samarkande made an effort to cooperate, the folder remained thin. The inquisitors consulted it with dour expressions. The physical and mental pressures would have to be intensified. After the slaps, threats of violation, and abasements, she was made to watch the rape of another prisoner. The girl, whom the referent sometimes called Astrid Koenig, and other times “the girl from Orbise,” was too exhausted to resist, but she sobbed a name, her real name, Marina Peek, so as to leave at least one non-falsified mark in someone’s memory, in the improbable—though not entirely impossible—case that one day a search committee investigated her disappearance and questioned the men and women who survived. Maria Samarkande was held next to the sink by a soldier who had the face and smell of an uneducated adolescent. The referent did not encourage the rapists, and was content to stare at Maria Samarkande. He did not take his eyes off her. The girl from Orbise didn’t struggle, and when she wasn’t crying out her identity, she whispered a series of numbers. Maria Samarkande shuddered. Nearby, the bucket exhaled the stench of the morning meal. She was forced onto all fours to wash the ground after Marina Peek’s martyrdom. The water hadn’t been emptied. Maria Samarkande opened her eyes, stared at the black surface in which the lightbulb was reflected. The washrag was floating, stringy and repugnant. She recalled the cold twistings she had made with it, as the referent marched her on her hands and knees, kicking her sides, her stomach. She remembered and, so as not to dwell suicidally on the question, tried to walk to the door.

She kept her back glued to the wall. Her eyes were again closed. She counted slowly, thinking it would help her fight against mental confusion, pain, and fear. As she pronounced one hundred nineteen, she realized that she was touching the door, and stopped. The door was slightly ajar. She glanced into the crack. At least forty centimeters away, the guard was sleeping. The man looked stitched into his greenish pants and jacket. His close-cropped hair was light brown in color, and below that, his skin was pink. This man had not violated Marina Peek, but nothing stopped her from imagining his involvement in other savageries suffered by other women. Maria Samarkande could have retraced her steps, grabbed the small cast iron grating, opened the door wide, crept into the office, and killed the guard with a blow to the neck. She knew which vertebrae to strike, the right place had been shown to her when she frequented the gyms reserved for police, in the distant past when she collaborated with the police and accepted missions abroad, in the New Lands, accompanied by Jean Vlassenko. She could have gathered her strength and stabbed the piece of iron where it had to go. But what then? What would she have to do next? And for what purpose? Further into the office, there were two chairs, a table with a typewriter, shelves containing several archival boxes, and walls decorated with posters exhorting young people to rally against enemies of the Colony. A bulb was shining at the end of a wire, exactly like the one in the nook where the interrogation had taken place. The filament was reflected in the top of a window. Outside, a thick night prospered. Nothing could be made out on the other side of the window, except for a linden branch. Supposing that Maria Samarkande managed to kill the soldier and get out of the building, and then break through the station's outer wall, which, it must be said, required an improbable convergence of luck and heedlessness, she would end up on the street with no prospects, no chance to go into hiding or take shelter with allies. The clandestine rings didn't exist, they were a literary invention that she herself had helped forge, in propagandist texts that the Air Force officer and referent were dissecting in front of her line-by-line in order to find holes and contradictions, and metaphors demonstrating that she had been wavering ideologically for a long time and that, far from loyally

serving the Colony, the society to which she owed everything, she was cynically preparing for her defection. The underground networks belonged to the realm of stories, and in reality, far from fanciful novels, there were only two nearly identical totalitarian systems: the Colony and the New Lands, and, wherever one went, the camps: isolation, relegation, transit, concentration, sanitary, testing, lumberjack, reeducation, extermination, day parole, self-managed, quarantine, vacation. As for allies who could hide her, most had been deported to unknown locations, or they had fled, without hope and without a trace. Going home had once more brought unhappiness to her daughters Bahia and Karima, whose fatherless adolescence had been difficult, and whose existence would now be motherless as well. She continued to examine the back of the soldier's neck, the reflection of the lightbulb in the glass, the unmoving branch of the linden tree. She counted the seconds. The guard moved in his seat, his breath became inaudible. Maria Samarkande again pressed herself against the wall. She moved back to the bucket. The door was still open. Her legs were weakening. She sat down next to the bucket and closed her eyes, listening to the soldier's breathing and the hiss of air in the ventilation shaft. She saw the lightbulb through her eyelids. The need to vomit returned like a wave. The nausea from the light was joined with an irritation in her throat. Her mouth was dry. She had to drink something. She parted her lashes and moved. She remembered the additional sufferings imposed by her bladder when the interrogation lasted for hours and, worried about the sound she would make, she squatted over the drain, pulled down her pants, and urinated. Her underclothes smelled bad. Her lower abdomen was on fire. She remembered the rape of Marina Peek, of Astrid Koenig. She suddenly suspected that a defense mechanism had triggered inside her mind and that these names and silhouette of a tortured woman were projected to hide the truth from her and to protect her from the truth. She indeed knew these names, or names like them. She had written them in tales that had never been published, but which were dear to her, and which, despite their distorted and autumnal, post-exotic style, revealed how she saw the world and connections between people, between the living and the dead. The referent had read

this collection and recited passages from it without consulting his notes, by heart, then he reproached her for having written such an egotistical work, one that did not show in a clear fashion whether she appreciated or hated concentration-camp society. After pulling back up her unwashed clothing, she stood for a few moments before the water main, evaluating the risk of waking the guard, since she had already heard the blows of a battering ram through the pipes, then she twisted the spigot and dampened her mouth, drinking little, then, as the water flowed without breaking the tranquility of the night, she washed her hands. There was from time to time a gurgling in the drain pipe. She froze, listened, counted to twenty, continued her timid cleaning. Behind the door, the soldier was still asleep. She felt dizzy, a resurgence of bile. Her rib cage felt like it was being cracked bone by bone. Irritated by friction, her hands burned. She counted again. Since nothing happened in the silence, she decided to proceed to more intimate ablutions and, for several minutes, she washed herself, fighting back a general physical uneasiness and growing mental suffering as she discovered the pollution of her flesh. Her clothes were now soaked. She turned off the spigot, reinstalled herself at the base of the wall, near the reeking bucket, as if that way, by occupying the exact same space she was assigned during the interrogation, her hygienic initiatives would be seen as less brazen, her movements less shameful. The electric light pierced the depths of her eyes. She turned her head against the wall. Let's start again from the beginning, she thought. This was a phrase spoken often by the inquisitors, in particular whenever she had gone far into revelations about herself and others, when it seemed that she had given everything down to the most minute detail. The inquisitors thus wished to break within her any residue of courage, but, in fact, the possibility of starting over did not frighten her. She voluntarily said everything again, she repeated to the officers the entirety of her life and her dreams, adding with pleasure small variants, with no heed for the consequences, perhaps because as a writer she had always worked using a similar technique, copying and recopying her texts ten times, thirty times, one hundred times, from the first word to the last, though with changes in detail that then suggested other readings, other layers of sordid

lies or sordid sincerity, other unfathomable truths. The soldier was waking up. Maria Samarkande heard him cough, stir. He pulled himself out of the chair where he had been lolling, glanced into the room, closed the door. It slammed, then, due to a defect in the lock, opened once more. The soldier muttered and returned to his seat. Maria Samarkande had turned toward the wall, saying numbers one by one. Blood was pounding in her temples. Stabbing pains and sharp spikes shared the territory of her muscles. She curled her right hand between her thighs. Beneath her skirt, beneath her pubis, everything was inflamed. Her skin blistered. She counted three hundred sixty-two beats then started over. My name is Maria Samarkande, before the camps and my union with Jean Vlassenko I assumed other identities, such as Verena Nordstrand, Liliith Schwack, or Leonor Ostiategui, or Vassilissa Lukaszczyk, or Ellen Dawkes, but that doesn't matter. I am forty-one years old, I was raised in the Colony and in the spirit of Orbise, I stood on the side of the just, on the side of those who wanted to extend Orbise's power across the entire planet. I studied zoology, my master's thesis was on Amazonian three-toed sloths and their extinction, I worked in a veterinary research laboratory, then I was recruited by Services for missions abroad, in the New Lands. In my free time, I wrote, I painted with watercolors. After my recruitment, I worked in the propaganda department. I composed numerous articles in favor of the Colony and the regime I had helped to put in place along with millions of my codetainees and that, despite its monstrous history, I would help put in place anew if the chance presented itself, for I have never denied the fraternal luminosity of Orbise, and because I see no other way than the one that has brought us to this nightmare. I like to write, I've created romances, books of oneiric fiction, none of which has seen the light of day. A few friends have read them, as well as my dear Bahia and Karima. Certain texts are the fruit of an inextricable complicity with Jean Vlassenko. They are the story of our life and our death. My name is Maria Samarkande and I am dead. I do not know the date of my passing. I have detached myself from life several times over the course of the past decades, such as when I saw Jean Vlassenko leave on his voyage of no return. Or when beings whom I loved

were sullied and murdered before my eyes. The idea of a long, conscious death has always been strong in me, unhealthily strong, and it has only grown stronger since Wednesday, when, under the pretext of reviewing some old classified affairs, I was brought into this room, and when I recognized Jean Vlassenko in the features of the referent who had come to interrogate me. This man now carries another name, his personality has been dismantled and reconstructed, he works once more for the Committees of Vigilance and, when I met his gaze for the first time, he showed no emotion, as if seeing me didn't awaken a single memory. But it's him, there is no doubt. The militant from Orbise whom I accompanied on a special mission, in Asia, to neutralize Low Swee Long and others. And the father of my daughters, the man with whom I passionately spent my life and passionately created intimate literary worlds, reflecting our distress, our fears, our constant hope. He spoke to me as if he only knew me from the pages of an Intelligence dossier, and I spoke to him as if he possessed no particular individuality to me, as if I were directing my explanations and sobs to a divine, abstract police entity, crystallized in a simple and ignoble human form. Perhaps he was made to torture me, perhaps that was part of his punishment or the process of his redemption, or perhaps I had simply reached the tarry heart of our bad dream. I thought, in any case, that my silence on our past relations would be useful for him, and so I was silent. And this bitter drama followed its course, without my denouncing the bonds that united us, me and Jean Vlassenko, in a previous life, in our texts. But we are the same. Our bonds have not weakened. Whether I have to start over from the beginning or not, I will not confess to loving Jean Vlassenko until death and beyond. Everything has always been nothing. Only that remains: like a puzzle without a solution: at death's worst, yesterday we were the same, today we will be the same.

MARIA SAMARKANDE

VIEW FROM THE OSSUARY

Elements of Surrealist Claustrology

Translated from the French by J.T. Mahany

[PUBLISHER'S IMPRINT]

“We were young then and, to fight against the unforgivable absurdity of the world, WE HAD
WEAPONS.”

—Vassilissa Lukaszczyk, *Lisbon, Last Edge*

Translator's Note: Communication with the author of this manuscript was possible only with the aid of a mudang due to Maria Samarkande's posthumous condition, and her spirit was understandably reluctant to clarify certain potentially confusing points. The fault for any misunderstandings that may arise lie at my own feet. Consult with your shaman or veterinarian before reading.

I Toucans

Georges Swain, who secretly taught mammalogy in an annex in the Botanical Garden, met his death in an automobile accident from which I escaped, by unfortunate chance, unscathed.

I was trying to parallel park on a small, steeply sloping street that adjoins the aviary for hornbills and toucans, and my car was pulling in backward without a problem, when, due to something happening uphill that I couldn't see, since my head was twisted around to look downhill, toward the vehicle against which I was making sure to come up softly, Georges Swain, who at the same moment was taking a walk with two inspectors wearing raincoats, suddenly and wordlessly, and perhaps pushed, knelt down on the sidewalk; then, sidling his thorax between the curb and the tire, he arranged himself so that my front right wheel crushed his throat and the lower parts of his skull. The suspension absorbed the jolt. I hadn't felt, or seen, a thing.

Rather than come to the victim's aid, almost immediately the inspectors went to the other side of my car, opened my door, and leapt at me, which made me think a plot had been devised against me, although today, even in hindsight, I still can't figure out the reasoning behind it, and they took me in for questioning. The street was free of onlookers. No passerby had witnessed the scene, no one who could have given testimony in my defense. The principal inspector, Müller, forbade me from completing my parking operation, and, while I gripped the handbrake, he slid his right forearm toward the ignition key and tore it from its slot, then he accused me of criminal violence toward a codetainee. He added that, however, he did not lament the fact that this man, this codetainee, Georges Swain, had reached the end of his existence. Actually, I didn't know anyone named Swain.

I clung to the wheel and, guided by an imperious gesture on Müller's part, who wanted to confront me with my victim, I arched myself over my seat in such a way that my head dusted the ground, while my gaze touched the surfaces generally seen least: the dirty dents underneath

the car, the muddy vents, the tailpipe. I then saw Georges Swain's inanimate remains; because of the cause of death to which the police had resorted, there was little blood spilt.

"Did you know he was a mammalogist?" Müller grumbled above me.

I returned to a normal sitting position in the driver's seat. With an already-nostalgic feeling of urgency, I appreciated the padding's softness, since I understood that softness and ergonomics were soon, maybe forever, going to be taken away from me, and my eyes met Müller's, discovering there only a calculating and wily hostility, then, inspired by a surge of panic, I scrutinized the cages of cawing toucans. Past the foliage surrounding or embellishing the cages, one could hear, but not make out, these noisy birds, which belonged to the suborder of *picoides*, and which certain encyclopedias claimed to be mischievous, but troublesome, in captivity.

"Did you know him, Chung?" Müller insisted.

During the long months of interrogation that followed these brief moments, I had plenty of spare time to learn how devious Georges Swain's sympathies and antipathies had been, and how suspect his proclamations of loyalty to the Colony and to the Orbise ideal. I was also taught mammalogy. It's a somewhat unsophisticated science, less subtle than ornithology, which has always been my preference, and it served me little thereafter, during my stay in the camp.

What more to say about this story and my life? I slaughtered larches in incalculable number, firs, black and immense resinous trees; in a fight between convicts, I lost three fingers and my left eye.

What else? Pretty much nothing.

The food given to us is better lately. I think, judging by the sky's contrasts, a new harsh winter is coming. Fate has spared me until now. For eight years, I've been the barracks leader. I still sometimes think about the Botanical Garden, the interrogations with Müller. I'm not complaining. My life has been ordinary. I don't blame anyone. That night I saw a toco toucan in a dream; I rarely dream of ramphastids, but still it happens.

I don't know how many days or years I have left before someone decides to end my terrestrial sojourn. And I also don't know whether I'll welcome this end or despise it.

II Turtle

During the private viewing of the exhibition that Warda Andersen had organized in honor of her recently *taken* (as we said in those days) husband, I slipped off into a side gallery and, under the pretext of looking for the bathroom, opened several doors in the Andersens' residence.

I rummaged around in the half-darkness. The rooms smelled of cleanliness and beeswax-based cleaning products, and were steeped in a moonlight that facilitated my movements and made both shapes and spaces seem precarious and unreal, which in turn brought to mind the moods of Andersen's canvases. Finally, at the end of a hallway, I entered the kitchen. The lights inside were bright.

The Andersens had several beautiful daughters, with whom we were all more or less in love, and, between the sink and the table laden with dirty dishes, I recognized Naya, the oldest, who, squatting, was in the middle of cutting up a turtle.

The murder and dismemberment of chelonians, from any considered point of view, whether in the name of culinary art or something more abstract, is a sequence of steps both obscure and revolting. Naya was twenty-two and had golden eyes. She raised them at me and ungently demanded to know what I was doing here, in a part of the house where she had thought she could escape society, the afflictions of propriety, true sorrows.

Since I had no answer, I said nothing.

Between us, on the yellow tiling, the damaged carapace was still and bleeding. I did not express the desire to stoop down and help finish the momentarily abandoned work. I was moved by Naya's beauty and by the idea that, day and night, we brush up against absurd massacres. Naya lifted the corpse, wrapped it in a cloth shroud, and left it to drip in the sink, then she washed her hands and led me out of the kitchen.

We crossed the patio, passed behind a snowberry bush, and then took a few more steps, so as to leave the circle of the kitchen lights' indecent shine, then we stood together in the shadows.

The landscape evoked the lunar velvets of Andersen's paintings, the reversed forests he invented, the inverted, distant lakes, lost among skies that have always renounced the hope of twilight. On the horizon shimmered a riverbend, and against the night we saw clearly, despite the distance, a wooden construction looming over it, which had been or was or would soon be a watchtower.

We didn't hear a sound. The chatter of Warda Andersen's guests didn't reach us; I imagine it flowed over the hill's facing slope and was absorbed by the trees, black bark, mosses, silvery or black foliage. No rumbling engine tore through the night; there were no roads around the house, only undrivable paths. To return to the city or the camp, the guests would have to make their way through the woods. Some, in the early and cold hours of morning, would get lost and disappear. Their deaths would not be as horrible as a turtle's, but they would disappear.

"Naya," I said. "I've been lying to your parents for fifteen years. I'm not an art critic."

"Who do you work for?" the young woman asked violently.

"I don't know," I said.

"But you're loyal to them?" she asked. "You'll always be loyal to them?"

We walked again for a bit on the lawn, trying to identify a few constellations, then we lived together, for nineteen years, in a way that I would not hesitate to qualify as harmonious, sharing the essentials and avoiding the taste of betrayal, then Naya died.

Naya Andersen passed away yesterday, from cancer, as she looked at me with her golden eyes; she didn't speak any prayer, she didn't ask me to join her, but I made her understand that today I too was going to depart.

We need one another. We form but a single being. To be reunited with her, a turtle knife will do.

III Cricket

After the meal, a man named Wellensohn was in the middle of smoking a dried herb cigarette with me, leaning like me against the fence, against this first veil of iron wire we called the fence, wrinkling his eyes as he faced the sun which, while already low above the pines, wasn't reddening yet and yet still was burning, when, suddenly, a representative from the Committee of Vigilance came out of the administration building, situated about sixty meters from where we were, and hailed him.

Wellensohn immediately quelled the delegate's impatience; he made a wide gesture at his address, a sort of greeting that meant he would comply momentarily, and, when this moment came, he allowed himself a tiny moment of respite and looked into my eyes. The cigarette butt was between my lips. I handed it over to him in great haste. He accepted it and, while we nervously observed each other, unable to speak a word, he grasped my hand, making sure to slide into my fingers the matchbox in which he kept his tamed cricket, then he pulled away.

A few small trees grew between the first and second fence, near the ditch. Instead of examining the windows of the building that had engulfed Wellensohn or scrutinizing the door that had slammed shut behind him, I began contemplating the soft green of the new branches. Some chickadees materialized among the needles; they chased each other while chirping—lovely little coalmen—their heads animated by charming jolts. Soon enough they flew away.

I stayed as long as possible in front of the fence. The sun was slowly diluting behind the mountains. The air was thrumming with insects; clouds of gnats were dancing clumsily over the grass, directly above anthills and even higher, in the open sky, between pinetops, at distances that my astigmatic vision made incalculable. A van passed through the first barrier, then the second, stopping each time for inspection, and then headed for the woods, its cargo unknown—it could be conveying anyone, the quick or the moribund, travelers from nowhere, Wellensohn maybe. The evening sprawled out and, after sunset, there were still the hums of bees, wasps.

When the twilight grayed, I returned to the barracks.

Following the central span of the shack, I noticed that Wellensohn's space was empty. All his belongings had been taken from his bunk: his work jacket, his cricket's formal cage, his bowl.

I sat on my bed, my feet brushing against the floor and its dust, and, in the darkness aggravated by the clothes hanging over my head, I opened the matchbox Wellensohn had given me when we said our farewells. Besides the cricket, it contained a photograph, folded so that the creases didn't destroy its legibility or, in particular, mutilate the faces constituting its center. The cricket squeezed himself into the depth of some crevice and began a series of calls, to which several of his peers of the same status in the barracks and the night responded unvehemently. I smoothed the glossy paper, I flattened it, as if desiring, through a ritual caresse, to claim it for myself, and then, obeying an almost police-like reflex, I turned it over to see if there was any information on the other side. I deciphered a nearly erased caption, a single word: "Samira."

I came back to the image.

There were two women, one very young, having not long left adolescence behind her, and the other, who could have been her mother, in full and splendid maturity; both challenged the camera lens with a gaze whose intelligence hid neither weariness, nor dread, the interrogations in the hours to come. They weren't in conspiracy, but it was obvious that they shared the same secret intention to send a message to someone beyond the photographer and that, after the ordeals and distance, they could watch without blushing. One could make out their bound hands and the interested crowd surrounding them: soldiers on leave, demobilizees, conscripts, as well as the inevitable uniformed bounty hunters. A handful of details made me think that the shot had been taken in a train station, on a station platform: for example during an escape attempt or a transferral.

I heard remarks on Wellensohn's departure coming from the neighboring beds. No matter their language or ethnic group, the majority belonged to the minds of pessimists. The fact

that the Committee of Vigilance, and not an outside institution, was charged with accelerating Wellensohn's dossier indicated that the order given wasn't concerned with repatriation, but rather an allocation to a new transit camp. At best, Wellensohn would end up behind another fence, in some region belonging to the Colony or the New Lands, and, at worst, the Committee of Vigilance would strike him from its archives, then declare an open investigation into the circumstances of his disappearance and, after six months of fruitless paperwork, claim to a phantom commission never having on its lists a traveler answering to such an identity and never having accommodated, even for a night, any sort of Wellensohn.

The darkness was growing. I tried, in memory of the disappeared, to carry on a silent conversation with these women staring at me. The cricket shrilled close to my ear. I didn't know which one was named Samira: which, of the two captives, would have responded to my whispers, had I had the audacity to whisper my sorrow before the two.

Eight years later, in a border town, I saw Wellensohn again. He was dressed like I was, like in the time of the exile and the camp, in an old pullover and moderately clean jeans, and he seemed to be walking toward me.

We recognized each other immediately.

We went to sit on a bench, in an ugly garden where children were playing near the sandboxes, under the watch of mothers who resembled all the mothers of the world: sometimes possessive in excess, sometimes indifferent to the falls and shouts of their progeny.

He handed me his pack of cigarettes. Once again we were together, sharing, in a foreign land, a smoke and a moment of diurnal light.

After several minutes, I asked Wellensohn who Samira was: which of the two lovely women whose memory he had transmitted to me, in a moment when we imagined that he might be eliminated in the offices of the Committee of Vigilance.

I have always been moved by the greater mystery and poetry of this name, Samira, which in Arabic means *the confidante* and even, it seems, *the woman with whom one entrusts the night*.

Since he pretended not to remember the matchbox business and to be interested solely in the cricket's fate, I again reacted in a way that revealed how much police brutality still remained, undegrading, within me, and, slipping between two hesitations that punctuated his unease, I asked him direct questions:

"This woman, this Samira. . . When you came back, did you find her? Did you try to find her?"

He didn't respond.

"Was she in a camp too?" I asked again.

His lips parted, but nothing came out.

I felt ashamed to have stirred up such grief in him. I made an effort to utter two remarks about the cricket, then shut up.

While talking, we had been following the progression of the children and mothers, but, now that there were no more words between us, we both stared at each other, vaguely imagining the last long second, eight years ago, when we had exchanged a silence, and, certainly, our pupils were speaking without turning away or fleeing, and our eyelids weren't trembling, but we had aged, both of us, and nothing in our bodies or minds could stop an inopportune dampness, an interfering dampness, from obscuring what we could distinguish of the other's hardship. Little by little Wellensohn lost all assertiveness; in turn, I decomposed, and we became again what we were: two dead men, near the border, who had failed in their journey and fallen silent.

IV Aurochs

The house Pilgrim had been allocated during his reeducation, to allow him to pull himself together, rewrite his manuscript while inspired, this time around, by aesthetic values that conformed more tightly to the Colony and the general public, creaked—it creaked terribly. It was a tiny bungalow, made up of one room and a kitchenette with a large sink and cabinets. There was water, but no electricity. Pilgrim unpacked the contents of his suitcase and, that first night, because of the noises, didn't shut his eyes at all. The floor and walls seemed to be filled with painful anxieties. Someone had suffered there, intensely and for a long time, and echoes of his or her despair continued to haunt the construction materials.

Pilgrim spoke to the creakings. During his preventative incarceration, he had learned how to listen, and respond, to the voices of walls. Tiny traces of misfortune can become embedded in dead matter. He had learned how to transform those traces into memories of men and women. He mixed them with his own, and they kept him company and comforted him.

The house was forever lukewarm and gloomy. The sole window had no glass. It looked out onto the street; in order to conserve some small shred of privacy, Pilgrim had to keep from disturbing the curtain of tulle that served as mosquito net. Whenever he moved the material that blocked off the light, the gazes of the curious immediately fell upon him. His head was at the same height as the passersby, who were numerous at all hours of the day and night.

The street was structured like a shopping mall. A thick and dirty glass canopy was raised over it, reducing the world to a sort of indistinct tunnel. The crowd of half-free detainees meandered continuously, subjected to the reproaches barked by the police over the radio. Its rhythms were irrational and, quite often, there were reactions of panic. When the disorder was at its zenith, women would shout and run, men would beat each other. Some would fall.

When he had enough of the crepuscular atmosphere that oppressed his abode, Pilgrim would say goodbye to the creakings, put them in charge of the place, and go out to immerse himself in the human stream. He would walk to the ossuary, which blocked off the end of the

street, and, once there, depending on his mood, either retrace his steps or linger, trying to recognize someone in the heap of patellas and keels, among the jaws, clavicles, vertebrae. As much as he rummaged, he never recognized anyone.

The street was long, lined with containers and cages similar to Pilgrim's, between which were inserted state stores and loudspeakers. On his way home, he would hand over his milk or tobacco tickets, receive the goods he had asked for, then return to his writing machine.

Pilgrim's thesis was on the circumstances surrounding the extinction of the last aurochs in the Jaktorów Forest, at the end of the 16th century. The committee had not accepted his romanticized version of events, and made a mockery of the compassion he had shown toward the last representative of the species, who died in captivity on October 12th, 1627. Additionally, Pilgrim had been rebuked in the past for his relations with enemies of the Colony, as well as with an anarchist group that had advocated the murder of the head of the Jaktorów mammalogy department.

While Pilgrim, in the stifling darkness, tried suddenly to recall the name of the professor he was accused of pointing out to fanatical killers to slaughter in front of his students, as he consulted his personal records on famous mammalogists, a rumble outside swelled, with the sounds of an unequal struggle and beating, and a man was thrown against the doorstep.

Pilgrim opened the door. At his feet lay a dazed form, which he first took for a dead beggar or a large mammal that torturers had wrapped in grotesque rags. The form began to moan; it was distinctly human. Pilgrim leaned over him. The man had skinned his knees and hands in the fall. Pilgrim invited him in to clean his wounds, but rather than going to the sink, the man preferred to sit on the bed and, once there, began to nod his head, eyes closed, without saying a word, like a groggy boxer recovering between rounds.

The curls on his forehead were the color of dirty straw, which contrasted with the rest of his ruddy, abundant fur. There was no visible scar where his horns had been sawed off, but despite this, there were still bumps remaining. This being did not inspire confidence. Although

ruined after the brief lynching he had suffered, his clothes seemed to come from a wardrobe foreign to the prison camp's norm. He's wearing a wig, Pilgrim thought as he sat on the chair facing him.

"Is that you, Pilgrim?" the guest finally said, with effort.

His head swayed from right to left as he panted. His moist, black nose trembled each time it expelled air. He had placed his heavy hands on his legs to hide the gashes in his pants, the bloodstains, the oil and dust splotches that had turned him ragged when he fell.

In the street, the crowd had calmed.

The house creaked.

Pilgrim agreed.

"I was named in your place at the aurochology lab," the other man said. "My name is Coltrane; perhaps you've heard of me?"

"No," said Pilgrim.

"I did everything to avoid getting your position," said Coltrane.

"Can you give me any news from there?" asked Pilgrim.

"News about the lab?"

"About my family," said Pilgrim. "Do you know what happened to them?"

"No," said Coltrane.

Pilgrim scrutinized Coltrane, then he offered him a glass of milk. They shared a few university anecdotes, then Coltrane talked about the Jaktorów Forest and the murder of the head of the mammalogy department. He couldn't remember the victim's name either. They searched together for a moment; they dug in vain into the loose recesses of their memory. In their downtime, they listened to the house creak.

"What's wrong with your house?" asked Coltrane.

"Nothing," said Pilgrim. "It's not like us. It remembers."

Then, after washing his scrapes in the sink and refusing to take a written message to Pilgrim's wife, which, ultimately, proved that he was not a police agent, since otherwise, with the intention of bringing it to the Committee, he would have seized any paper without objection, Coltrane left.

Pilgrim lingered, sixteen years—sixteen and a half years—more. Then he, too, left.

V Noctules

Identical to the one we were piloting, a boat was running on our right, at the same speed as ours and with the same smooth rowings of oars. Three men were sitting on the thwarts, with faces painted like generals in a Chinese opera. The one in the back wasn't moving; his lips were emitting silent exhortations or prayers. The other two were pulling hard in step; they braced and swayed to the rhythm of the water. From one boat to the other, the sounds of breathing were in harmony. We were united in a single reflection, like two symmetrical mirrors.

In the rowboat, only Parkhill and I were wearing masks that suited the night. Parkhill was hidden behind black make-up split by a light blue and white design, imitating the wings of a butterfly; painted such, he resembled Wu Li Hei from *The Luhua River*. With comparable colors, my face evoked Zhang Fei when he's disguised as a fisherman.

Larsen hadn't had time to finish putting on his make-up. He had jumped into the skiff at the last second, narrowly escaping the dogs, and, beneath the moonlight enhanced by the sparkling wavelets, his chalky-white physiognomy represented no one and signified nothing.

Despite the late hour, we could see far: the bend in the river, upstream, where we had sustained a few rifle shots as we passed, and the dense banks, sometimes thorny with reeds, other times enshrouded by branches and hair-like moss, by heavy, twisted branches, bent under the weight of impenetrable foliage, then, downstream, the riverbend toward which we were heading, with the hope that beyond we would find a pontoon and a hamlet, as well as a vehicle to bring us to the end of the world.

The sky, a clear and beautiful black, vibrated now and then from the squeaking caress of bats, a sign of luck and even happiness, it is said. From the crucibles where pieces of pure moon constantly melted and embraced, melted and darkened, turned to silver once more then faded and were reborn, rose the aroma of carp.

"Careful!" a voice suddenly rasped.

Parkhill's, maybe, or my own.

I awoke.

The darkness in the barracks was of a middling quality. Streetlights shine all around the building, and even when we hang in front of the windows, after the lamps are put out, work jackets, shirts, rags, the light enters in waves.

I got up, I passed by Parkhill's bedframe, and went outside to urinate, then I squatted on the cinder blocks serving as front steps. The night was hot and starless. The searchlights illuminated the entrance to the camp, the barbed wire, the main barrier. Around the lamps flew noctules eating insects; I recalled my dream, the gliding bats and their whistlings, so close to me, and the reflections on happiness I had pondered. Several insomniacs were walking along the fence or, dressed like myself in only an undershirt and boxers, smoking a cigarette while dreaming of better days.

Behind my back, the door opened. It didn't creak. We had oiled the hinges so as not to be endlessly jolted awake at night, because of the heavy foot traffic.

"I can't sleep," someone said.

It was Larsen.

"In this heat," I said.

"I thought a storm was coming," Larsen sighed.

"A storm's just what we need in the morning," I said.

"It'd be refreshing," said Larsen.

Larsen is the author of one of the best monographs on painted faces in Chinese theater. His thesis exists in three abundantly illustrated copies; one is lying under my bed, the other among his belongings, between his spare pair of pants and a *Manual of Practical Mammalogy* that Parkhill had given him; the third volume has been sent to the higher authorities of the Committee of Vigilance, through official channels; Larsen has been expecting a judgement for sixty-eight weeks already. Each book has been copied with utmost care. To paint the masks, Larsen used mugshots, which we had in excessive numbers; he reported on the makeup's

expert pirouettes, the curved smudges that transform the human face into a luxuriant symbol. In the volume in my custody, I appear eight times: I am Mu Ying, Jiang Zhong, Chai Gui, Bo Luo, Zhang He, Fang Long, Zhang Fei, Bao Zhen.

“It’s good to be among friends again,” Larsen said, after a long moment of silence.

Some magic minutes are suitable for the most terrible confessions.

“You know, I worked for murderers,” I said.

“So?” said Larsen. “Weren’t the murderers right?”

After a second cigarette, I went back to lie down. Despite the drafts, the barracks smelled of staleness, tobacco, sweating bodies. I wrapped myself once more in the sheet with an unpleasant texture, even though it had been recently washed. In front of the windows, the clothes had lost any understandable form; they didn’t even look like spectres. Several men were snoring, not very loudly. Stimulated by the cigarettes and by my dream, which I was reimagining in detail, trying to speculate on a possible sequel, on the chances of successfully escaping by river, I was taken by no state of somnolence. The door opened and closed; even well-greased, the hinges made sound. I thought about our fate. People were speaking in hushed tones outside; I heard their benign phrases, their weary voices; the noctules were emitting high-pitched noises.

Later, Larsen came back to sleep. His bed was situated near a window. In the morning, a storm broke.

Even later, two years later, we made an escape attempt by river. Parkhill died in the boat, killed by a bullet. Larsen dove into the current, his body wasn’t found. I was recaptured.

Larsen’s books have been destroyed.

They no longer exist, so I suppose that they have been destroyed.

VI Lizard

During the summer of 1914, in Poland, my grandmother caught a lizard. She bent down and, with a flick of the wrist, closed her hand on the beast. She then stood, as if frozen; she held her modest prey within her fist.

The trail was deserted. Around us were tall grass, a few nettles, a whitish gravel, and the silhouettes of buildings marking the end of the urban area: a factory, some warehouses. Near the embankment, the light played across grains of sand. I say *us* out of friendship for my grandmother, who was young and beautiful that day, the 16th of August, and out of compassion for the lizard. It was waving its pitiful claws agitatedly. It had hatched five weeks ago. The first, insouciant part of its life was coming to an end.

Several seconds passed. Little by little, the fingers pinching a thorax, legs, loosened their grip. The creature escaped. Now, there was nothing quivering on her open palm; all that remained was a sad ransom, three centimeters of caudal appendage, from one end of which emerged a drop of slimy blood. It was not a sight to behold.

As a child in the fifties, I would sometimes hunt by hand in this way. My quarry consisted of grasshoppers, harvestmen, gray saurians, maybugs, potato beetles, caterpillars, antlions. The night dwells within us: we possess predatory urges. It takes us a long while to respect things that jump; we obey unseemly orders, transmitted from the ancestral depths, and for a long time we agree to massacre humble bodies and fates. In my memory is a day when, between thumb and index finger, I had imprisoned a piece of flesh snatched from a lizard; it twisted back and forth; not knowing what else to do, I threw it.

The night and absurdity dwell within us.

In August, 1914, my grandmother felt no pity for reptiles. She examined this segment of fresh remains and decided that it would bring her luck, that it would protect her against the violences and uncertainties of war. And it indeed accompanied her throughout her slow journey to the East, and then into old age and death. She glued it to a page in a notebook, wrote the

date and place, Ostrowiec, and took care not to lose it. The notebook was passed on to me. I am looking at it right now. The lizard tail is still there. It's shriveled a bit, but has otherwise endured the century without corruption.

After wrapping the object in a handkerchief, my grandmother was more receptive to observing what was going on around her. Cannons were rumbling; Austrians and Russians were fighting for control of Sandomierz, forty kilometers away. The weather was magnificent. There must have been an apiary nearby, and the bees were flying around in every direction, indifferent to the humans' new war. We were in the outskirts of the city, as I already said. The wind brought with it the smell of resin. In the distance, the fir-covered hills had a peaceful, dark green appearance. On the road to Sandomierz lurched munitions convoys and carts transporting the wounded, but nearly everything beyond the trees was erased. A haze of dust could scarcely be made out above their crowns.

My grandmother was watching this, when suddenly she spied a dirigible.

It was flying over the road to the front. It was a vanguard military object, the color of mercury, superbly bizarre, an enemy. Whenever it hung over their lines, the Russians shot up at it, but unsuccessfully. The officers, scrutinizing it with binoculars, distinguished in the cockpit a hunched-over man orienting toward them a device with powerful optics, then making notes on general staff cards.

This man had bright eyes and a lightly balding forehead. His name was Cornelius Pfitzmann. Relying on his rigorous and scientific sense of observation, the military had assigned him a mission to gather information, although his aerial navigation skills had never been confirmed: this was, in fact, his very first flight. In civilian life, his specialty was zoology; bats, in particular, were his passion, as well as certain suborders of primates whose morphology and behaviors he wished to study after the war, if he survived.

He survived. I harbor a great sympathy for him; one will understand why by browsing the few lines that constitute his biography. I wanted to include here a sentimental episode between

my grandmother and him, but the dirigible floated at an altitude that forbade any sort of relationship, however platonic it may have been.

So, a few notes on the adventurous life of Cornelius Pfitzmann. He participated in the Spartacist uprising of 1919; in prison, he gave lectures on mammalogy to his codetainees; in the twenties, he wrote several articles on Malaysian treeshrews, then he dedicated himself exclusively to the Komintern's clandestine activities, then, once more, with a yearning to make himself useful to little beasts, he delved into questions of dentition, tongue, and fur; he worked at the Hamburg zoo; no one noticed him.

There was, in 1938, a resurgence of interest in the pentails of Malacca, along with an argument over their inclusion in the suborder of prosimians. Pfitzmann played a decisive role in the team that demonstrated that these marginal mammals were not insectivores. Then, since the Nazis had launched an inquiry into his ideological ties and were starting to draw circles around the menagerie, he left for Moscow, barely escaping Aryan claws. My grandmother, at the time, no longer lived in the capital that Pfitzmann imagined to be the epicenter of the world revolution. She had emigrated to Siberia to follow her husband, Toghtaga Özbek. That is why, here too, their fates cannot be connected. It's regrettable; in my opinion, Özbek and my grandmother would have celebrated him as a brother in arms and unhappiness.

In Moscow, Cornelius Pfitzmann didn't have enough time to visit the high places of mass tourism. At most, he managed to spend half an hour circling the statue of Dzerzhinsky in Dzerzhinsky Square, since he had arrived early for the summons that the Organs had issued to him.

We lose his trail, then find again in the Far East, where he is contributing to deforestation. He has grown old. His passions have dulled; he isn't as obsessed with zoology anymore. At night, he abstains from speaking at conferences on local fauna, preferring instead to lie down and try to sleep.

Finally, one morning, a poorly sawn larch twists off balance and falls in an unexpected direction, and Pfitzmann realizes that he is in its path. He understands that if he does not jump out of the way, he will be reduced to pulp. He does not move.

VII Conclusion

The car was driving quickly into the mountains when I suddenly had the impression that there was a medium-sized tegeraria scampering on the edge of the sun visor, and, because of the pathological terror that spiders caused me, I began to writhe in the driver's seat, no longer concerned with driving. The car left the road, and then, after a painful eighth of a minute in which every second overlapped the one before with chaotic shrieks and vertiginous promises, it came to a halt.

Everything around us was broken and twisted. Our bodies had followed the general trend, and there were places where they filled the iron's more misshapen cavities, as if, at the moment of the crash, they had urgently tried to take refuge in the metal's folds, to cling at all costs to the deceitful spirals, the murderous hollows. To the end of that we had slid. At the heart of that, we lay.

The spider perhaps gamboled outside, safe and sound, continuing its dark exploration of small worlds and recesses, but, in our story, its role was finished.

Doubtlessly because something had been cut and not reestablished, I felt no pain. I wasn't complaining. Neither did I reproach fate for having placed a few centimeters away from me Maria Samarkande's face. Maria looked at me, her eyes wide open, stunned from blood and incredulity, incredibly beautiful.

Silence had returned, or maybe I'd lost my hearing at the same time as my sense of touch and pain. But it didn't matter. The silence was dense, magmatic, already immensely strong. The wreck in which we were encased wasn't burning, wasn't moving. Maria and I examined each other tranquilly.

I was afraid of going out without having reassured Maria, and I said:

"Do you remember the people dancing under the trees, that night in Peking?"

Maria couldn't answer, but, from a blink of her eyelids, she showed me that she remembered.

We tried to resurrect smiles on our crumbled masks. Between us passed the final image and a wave of tenderness, soothing tenderness.

We remembered the nightly June dances in Peking. The simple happiness of waltzes on the concrete, to the sound of a transistor, in the warm dust, under what we'll call, since there's not enough time for botanical research, linden trees: the linden trees of Xuan Wu Men Avenue.

We had traveled out of the Colony and the New Lands, very far.

We were going to travel even further.

We looked at each other, feeling nothing more than our memories.

We were going to travel much further still.

Together.

II

Jean

Batyrzian was not at all partial to Swanna Hills, but, since he had just relieved the prisoner of the contents of his pockets, and since there was now a pack of cigarettes at his disposal on the table, along with a lighter, a few coins, and a handkerchief, he leisurely tapped a Swanna Hill out of the box and lit it without a word while studying Jean Vlassenko's anxious face, then his gaze traced a circular line around the room, a decommissioned laundry room where words rang and ricocheted whenever sentences were uttered too loudly, though first, as a plume of smoke stagnated around his head, he slipped the rest of the cigarettes into a pocket of his bomber jacket, then said You've taken the lying game too far, Vlassenko, and now you've lost, while Vlassenko muttered a rectification of the name Batyrzian had used, I don't deny being called Vlassenko, a long time ago, long before my death and reeducation, but when I was reborn the Committee of Vigilance baptized me with a new name, and I'd like you to take that into account, Batyrzian, then, after a silence, adding Oh, fine, if that's the name you want to destroy me under a second time, then go ahead, Batyrzian took a breath and said The fact that you were so quick to reject the degree of familiarity that characterized our relationship until now shows just how fragile the inner stability you achieved by joining us was, Vlassenko, outlining the limits of the schizophrenic system controlling your thoughts while you were considering coming back over to our side, and, since Vlassenko had expressed by raising his eyebrows that he was expecting a more extensive argument, Batyrzian continued, You left the Rehabilitation Centers and adopted the appearance and behavior of a model police officer, but some of your Vlassenkian roots had not been extirpated, and I don't mean the elements of courage and abnegation and discipline we didn't want to see you deprived of in your new incarnation, since we had so greatly appreciated them in your previous life, enough, in any case, to entrust you with missions abroad, in the New Lands, important missions, and, since Vlassenko suddenly articulated, with a violence that reverberated off the mildew-stained walls and ran the length of the pipes all the way to the slate trays where sheets had not been folded since at least the

sixties, By important missions you obviously mean blood missions, Batyrzian confirmed with a nod of his head and responded, Yes, if you'd like, if you'd prefer that term, Vlassenko, blood missions, and he blew smoke at his hands which were flat in front of him, on the desk, a short distance from the rubber-bound folder containing the criminal dossier, and he said Personally, when I happen to be assigned work like that, I often say that Services is paying for me to study or vacation abroad, I get evasive, and on Vlassenko's face appeared a dark grimace, a very dark smile, and he insisted, saying Blood vacations, which created several seconds of silence in which both men dove back into their memories and the incommunicable secrets that always filigreed journeys into the New Lands, to the heart of the enemy camp, then Batyrzian moistened his lips with his tongue and continued So, I don't mean those qualities that, then he paused, then he continued I mean those inaccessible oneiric fields that you left abandoned deep in your memory and deep in your unconscious, and that you've exposed a few scraps of, in the past, when you dedicated your free time to loving Maria Samarkande like a hero from a novel and writing strange books with her, strange and clandestine opuscles, and Vlassenko turned his head toward the dusty skylights that behind the slate trays communicated with the early morning tar, since the hour was already quite late and terribly dark, and he measured the space that was going to welcome his screams if he were made to scream and that would welcome his death if he were killed, and where his unspoken words, which he was made either to let out or shut inside himself, would blossom, and, after six and a half seconds, Batyrzian continued to describe the hermetic worlds and constructions hidden within Vlassenko, and which had allowed him to devise simultaneously two or three independent sincerities, sometimes contradictory, sometimes not, and, as he illustrated this point while referring to the interrogation of Maria Samarkande, saying This is how we were able to get you to torture that woman, the one with whom you shared an essential part of your former life, an accomplice you passionately loved, without shuddering, Vlassenko quickly interrupted him and attempted to stand, which put a point on the fact that his right wrist and left ankle were cuffed to the chair,

and, after sitting back down, he maintained that, for Maria Samarkande, he had been killed by the police fifteen years ago, that she had already mourned for him, and that at no moment during the interview had she shown any connection between that Jean Vlassenko, who had once been her companion, and the referent who questioned and abused her, and, since the prisoner was pulling nervously on his handcuffs as he moved about, Batyrzian rose, slapped Vlassenko, and said I don't give a damn about the state of Maria Samarkande's soul, it's you, now, who's in the hot seat, and he blew smoke on Vlassenko's pale face, an acrid, blue-gray smoke that always comes from Swanna Hills, and, as Vlassenko inhaled a bit of reddish mucus and calmed himself, the investigator offered several neutral pieces of information concerning Maria Samarkande and the missions she had undertaken in Southeast Asia fifteen years ago, those blood vacations for which the Colony was paying them, Vlassenko and her, while Services was hunting the Low Swee Long Group and the Machado Group, then he changed register and began praising Maria Samarkande's writing talent, making remarks about her poetry that rebounded through the pipeworks and brushed against the walls degraded by the night and interrogations, and Vlassenko interrupted him, saying We composed together texts and post-exotic narracts, that's right, then It was an act of tenderness, an operation of delight and survival that we secretly accomplished, you couldn't understand this kind of sharing, then But, yesterday, she couldn't have imagined that I was a reincarnation of Vlassenko, a man the police had executed almost right before her eyes fifteen years ago, then You'd have to have spent a very long time in the Centers and the camps before you could accept the idea of reexistence and rebirth, then I mean really accepting it, outside of just literature, and Batyrzian cut in to say Her journey has begun, she'll accept it, then he explained again that the problem was situated elsewhere, then, all while crushing the butt of the Swanna Hill beneath Vlassenko's left ear, he said Maria Samarkande's reactions do not interest us, only yours, then This total absence of compassion which suited you during the abuses, and, since Vlassenko protested, quietly asking What do you know, Batyrzian, and What do you know about the mechanisms of

compassion, Batyrzian shook his head and said We thought that you would have a breakdown in front of Maria Samarkande, Vlassenko, Services was expecting that to happen, then he stopped, delivered several ferocious blows to the prisoner and continued, We needed that to happen, Vlassenko, and, since the prisoner displayed signs of his perplexity, he added in a more vulgar tone We wanted to make her, your Maria Samarkande, spill a lot more, then But she's like you, cast in the same shitty metal, kneaded from the same shitty and opaque material and not even an enemy, she hides in herself domains incompatible with the truth she claims to defend, then She admits to nothing of importance, then he hit Vlassenko on his burn and said You don't admit anything either, you play the role assigned to you and you play it to perfection, and But you keep inside yourself traces of an allegiance to a foreign power that isn't the enemy but of which we know nothing, and that has forever intrigued Services, though we haven't been able to pierce the heart of your treason despite the thousands of sleepless hours that have set the cadence of your reeducation, and despite the sham deaths that weren't shams, followed by a sham rebirth that also wasn't a sham, and that's what we wanted to do this time around, pierce this heart, penetrate into its interior so we finally know, and he continued, We had calculated that with this confrontation, with the suffering and the wounds inflicted on both of you, we'd get our answers, and that, while analyzing your literary wanderings, you wouldn't resist the horror of this reunion and, unconsciously or otherwise, you'd decrypt these so-called post-exotic messages that you'd managed not to divulge your life through, and that you, she and you, tried so hard to hide from us, then he lit a second cigarette and said And when I say *us* I mean a lot more than just the Vigilance Services, I'm also including in this *us* the Colony and its enemies abroad, then he suddenly spit on Vlassenko's face and said I'm including in this *us* every respectable member of the human species, just about the entire world, which doesn't include you, neither you nor her, then, since Vlassenko refused to react, he pushed him over along with the chair and went to the laundry room's door in order to hail the two civilians watching over the tape recorder in rigid boredom, who without complaining left their card game unfinished and

approached. He gave them the level of violence they were not authorized to surpass, then left. Jean Vlassenko was lying on the cement, chained to the chair. The backrest had crushed his left arm in the last part of the fall and his head had struck the ground. He soon realized that he was witnessing the end of his second existence, and he was not afraid, but, like fifteen years ago, he did not know the fate that Services had reserved for him, and whether or not he would be inflicted with the trial of a new, safe life, a vagrant march into non-remorse and oblivion and beyond all death, the drift that inevitably followed rebirth. Blood dripped over his eyelids and flowed across his ocular globes, soon creating between the world and him a meat-colored veil of tears. The two civilians stood him back up, uncuffed his ankle and wrist, then bound him to the water pipes, imposing on him an absurd, overextended position, tearing his groin and forcing him to try to keep a continuous balance using only his left leg, and, after these preparations, they broke two fingers on his left hand and examined him, trading opinions and snickering. Then, they attacked him. From time to time, they stepped back and took hold of the chair to throw it in his direction, preferring to aim for the thorax rather than the testicles or face. They didn't speak and asked him nothing. Vlassenko resisted, he began to moan before the blows in order to lessen the fear that always accompanied the shock, before the chair or shoes or fists reached him, and, when he had started to breathe again, he fixed his tormentors with his bloodied eyes and, for the tape recorder which he knew to still be on and for him, he yelled or murmured dense lists of women and men, to speak truly without ever bothering to specify when he had met them, from the time of his first existence, during his reeducation, or after, enumerating the names of assassinated enemies or companions and murdered comrades, detainees and bandit chiefs, police officers, minor artists, names that were worthless to the investigation and that no one had demanded him to utter, merely saying I am the only one who remembers them, or I am the last to have seen them in the flesh, and even I know things about them that would surprise Services, but the two torturers did not listen to any of his declarations and cared only about bashing him more. The position in which he was hooked to the wall forced

him to twist and hop ridiculously before his persecutors. After an uncertain amount of time, they stopped and left him. The laundry room door creaked, in the antechamber some chairs were moved, someone changed the magnetic tape, a Larsen effect terrified the night. Vlassenko tried to escape the torment, he grasped the pipes with his broken body. The leg supporting his weight was weakening, but, when he eased up, when he let himself hang, the handcuffs bit into his flesh and he felt as if the skin in his groin was splitting apart. No one was coming. He meditated for several minutes, despairing in his inability to break loose. In order to give a semblance of meaning to the present, he continued, moving his lips without forming sounds, the enunciation of the repertoire of living and dead beings inhabiting his memory. It was, as well, an homage. He mixed in a posthumous paste friends like Wolfgang Gardel, Irena Echenguyen, Kynthia Bedobul, Iakoub Khadjbakiro, Loo Kwee Choo, Jean Wernieri, Wong Soon Ho, Maria Schrag, and others, with those to whom his relations had been more ambiguous or whom he had denounced or killed, such as Low Swee Long, or Lim Gwee Chuah, or Machado. He drew out this litany as if it could never come to an end, when suddenly Batyrzian reappeared. He unhooked Vlassenko and let him collapse at the base of the wall like a mass of dirty flesh. He pushed him with the tip of one of his aviator boots, he shackled his legs to the chair, and he said You know the drill, Vlassenko, we're going to start back at square one, and he contemptuously examined the carcass laboriously crawling the length of the wall, and he encouraged him to get back to the soiled seat, then he verified that the handcuffs were locked and said Go back to the beginning, Vlassenko, and, since the prisoner hesitated, he clarified A silent alliance has been reestablished this week, between you and Maria Samarkande, a pact has been renewed, tell me about that, explain that to me, and, after a moment of tranquil nothingness during which he observed the neon tube that had begun to flicker dolefully above the slate trays and that cast away the shadows from the pipes and dilapidated spigots, he insisted, saying Explain to me why Maria Samarkande pretended not to recognize you, when you yourself led her interrogation down roads of digression, explain to me the motives behind this collusion, and Vlassenko lifted

his decomposed face toward Batyrzian, and he said What would you have done to her if I had knelt before her sobbing, what sort of savage would you have, and he stopped to fight against a stab of pain that came from far away, and suddenly he folded himself in two and tore himself from the chair while moaning and vomited a bit of liquid that smelled violently of death, then he stood back up and continued, We knew, but, since he did not finish the sentence, Batyrzian sat behind the table serving as a desk and began to flip through *View from the Ossuary*, one of the short mirrored works that Vlassenko and Maria Samarkande had written, a small quantity of narracts and lunar recitacts rather than a romance, and he said These days, between you and her, Services has discerned a relation as illogical and distinct as the ones between characters in this book, and, anticipating Vlassenko's response, added Weigh your options, Vlassenko, you won't get anything out of hiding behind literary evocations and timeless images, there's something else, a secret pact, we're certain, something that, then he considered his words and once again got up, and, having walked over to the slate trays, bent down and rummaged through the pile of bric-a-brac, then, equipped with a lead rod, turned back to the prisoner, and immediately invited him to search with him for the best terms to define what bound them together, Maria Samarkande and him, despite the separation and silence, and, after several attempts, they arrived at one approximation, for Vlassenko, whose teeth and lips were now shattered, managed to stammer Maybe, something, yes, some kind of union, a refusal, a definitive refusal of fate and reality, the rejection of everything, love for everything, you don't, then Batyrzian went back to sit before the manuscript that had never been published, never distributed within the Colony or transmitted to the enemy, and said This is a waste of time, Vlassenko, Services wants concrete information, not sentimental nonsense, and after Vlassenko shrugged, he pushed back his chair, went up to Vlassenko, brandished the shaft of lead, and brought it down on one of Vlassenko's clavicles, afterward saying to the prisoner's dislocated torso Don't shrug your shoulders when I speak to you, Vlassenko, that's not a very constructive attitude, then, since Vlassenko was indisposed for a few minutes, added We still

haven't talked at all about you and Maria Samarkande, then he left. The door creaked. Tatters of sentences rose in the adjacent room then fell. The tape recorder was audibly chirping as someone was rewinding it, the click of a switch, the recorded voice of Batyrzian, of Vlassenko. Batyrzian made a brief comment and, once more, the tape ran quickly, whistled. Vlassenko tried unsuccessfully to overcome his suffering. Many of his bones were mangled, no position soothed him. He murmured I do not have the name they gave me after my reincarnation, my name is Jean Vlassenko and nothing in my second existence is real, then he was silent. Then he said No. Then he murmured Maria Samarkande, several times, then he said I have never abandoned or betrayed you, no matter the horror that the world after death may have held, then he was silent once again. The incredible pain kept him from freely moving about his memories. Suddenly, while he thought himself mute, he realized that his mouth was emitting animal cries and sobs. For a time, he surrendered to this groaning and merely listened. The laundry room seemed to have been created to amplify the bellowings of the tortured. Then, the echoes diminished. The only thing that persisted was a heavy gasping. Vlassenko fixed his attention on the words emerging and roiling amidst the breaths. He was thinking aloud about Maria Samarkande. Fearing that the spying microphones were capturing declarations of love that he did not wish to communicate to Services or the enemy, whatever the nature of the enemy might be, he controlled himself and said I see a table, then, since the table appeared to him blurred and reddened, he blinked several times and added I can barely distinguish anything, my name is Jean Vlassenko, it has been fifteen years since I have had any age, I see before me a table and a book covered in blood, it's a book without age or date. No one other than us has read it, that's all there is to say on the matter. No one other than us has read it, and we are inside.

JEAN VLASSENKO

VIEW FROM THE OSSUARY

Glimpses of Post-Exotic Claustrology

Translated from the French by J.T. Mahany

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“Strangeness is the form taken by beauty when beauty has no hope.”

—Maria Clementi, *Minor Angels*

Translator's Note: After passing through the intelligence and censorship organs of Services, this manuscript may have been subject to unforeseen changes as well as the enemy's general influence. The fault for any misunderstandings that may arise lie at the feet of those responsible for the world's suffering. Reader discretion is advised.

I Swain

The moon had long since made its appearance behind the trees of the Botanical Garden, behind the Garden's finely wrought grilles and hornbeams, beyond the planes and elms, and for about an hour Georges Swain observed it from the corner of his eye. He watched its progress, its slow climb along bare branches. Winter was coming, and the trees were no more than skeletons. The plump, unagile sphere was moving like an indecently plump, cumbersome sphere; its uncouth presence was palpable. At any given moment, students both male and female were offering it their repressed anxieties. They let themselves be distracted by it and by the cries of nightbirds, incarcerated in a special aviary, closeby, a hundred or so meters away. They listened to the calls of common species, little screech and barn owls, and suddenly, when they had identified the velvet rasps of a snowy owl, they began to dream, they imagined free and shining, powdery expanses, then they shook themselves from their snow and returned to reality. Facing them, Swain was lecturing; he was talking about mammals that were going to die.

That evening, he was putting forth depressing hypotheses on the future of six-banded armadillos. The audience was assembled in front of a toolshed whose surroundings served as a classroom. The moonlight illuminated the shed's walls and turned the leaf-cluttered ground, the insomnia of several individuals, as well as Swain's bleak explanations a milky gray color. There was no other light.

Seeing that his students' attention was waning, Swain concluded the session. He spoke a few short sentences that summarized what he generally thought of edentates and the threat of extinction hanging over them, then he stopped.

One student, Manuela Aratuípe, asked a question about chlamyphores. She was a very pretty girl with thick, black, lustrous hair that longed to be caressed, and dazzling closed eyelids, and who occasionally visited Swain's fantasies. They were a discrete subtribe of *euphractinae*. Swain explained that they were composed of only two genera: *Chlamyphorus truncatus* and

Calyptophractus retusus. Because of the darkness, he wasn't able to meet Manuela Aratuípe's gaze. He smiled, his voice weakened.

A minute later, the audience dispersed and merged with the night and, when there was no one left on the paths, Müller, who had been attending the night classes for several months, left the concealing shadow of the bushes. He readjusted the collar of his raincoat and, sliding his hands into his pockets to protect them from the cold, he approached.

Swain was in the middle of putting away his notes. He sighed.

"Ah," he said to himself. "It's over."

Then he said:

"So, it was you, Müller?"

Müller froze, keeping himself a short distance away. A few pallid rays fell on his face. He looked obstinate, like someone about to declare bluntly his dislike of mammals, studies, and nocturnal seminars.

Swain muttered a few reticent words, as if he regretted having to deliver them into the auditory canals of the other man, and thus sully them.

"I'd been warned," he said, "that there was a plant in my class. But I'd suspected Hoffmann instead, since I've noticed several times that he was incapable of telling the difference between a suborder, an infraorder, and a tribe."

Müller shook his head.

"I thought you were less ignorant than he," continued Swain. "Less suspect."

"I'm right here," said Hoffmann.

He detached himself from the trunk of a plane tree where he had, until that precise second, formed a dark block. He moved noisily through the fallen leaves.

Swain took a step: he tried to find protection in the shadows. Müller grabbed him by the elbow and pulled him out. Hoffmann had sprung forward as well. The leaves were whispering

with all their strength beneath the soles of the three men, then everything became calm again. The nightbirds hooted and wailed; there was no other source of music in the world.

The interrogation took place in the toolshed. That night, no one slept. The snowy owls screeched without respite; everyone was writhing in their cages. The moon rose above the hornbeams, climbed toward the spruces, then hid itself; the darkness thickened for what seemed to Swain a considerable number of hours. Then came morning, cold and dry. Before leaving, they were waiting for the garbage to be collected on the neighboring street. Some self-evident zoological facts were stated, and nothing more: the infraorder of armored xenathrans has within it one family and several tribes; all are threatened by a short deadline.

II Andersen

Myriam Andersen saw the tears streaming down her mother's cheeks, the pearly cheeks of Warda Andersen, and felt in turn that her heart was capsizing; but, since she knew that expressing a shared pain would only make comfort more inaccessible, despite the apparent communion and embrace, the images of the disappeared one more blurry, and the night sadder still, she turned off the lights. The large room remained as it was for a moment, inhabited by two mute women and bathed in the weak lunar flood that was on the verge of diminishing. Sickly sweet fragrances entered through the windows and wide open doors; they mixed with the traces the guests had left behind, odors of food, drinks, cigarettes, and clean clothes. A light draft passed through the dining room and left to unravel itself farther away, in the corridors, in the bedrooms.

Warda Andersen wasn't moving. Her tears had maybe dried; or maybe she was still crying. She was compressed into an armchair as if she had just lost enough substance to soften her bones, reduce her vertebrae by a third. Facing her hung a painting that had scarcely been appreciated by critics and guests, titled *On the Verge of a Scream*: a clearing in the taiga, a mossy wooden raft floating twenty centimeters above the ground, and, off to the side, on a beach of ferns, a shaman in ceremonial garb, who had let go of his drum and whom the camp guards were threatening with an axe. Warda was looking at this, was entering into this, and wasn't moving.

On tip-toe, so as not to disturb her mother, Myriam went out onto the patio. She was wearing a thin silk shirt, in a bluish green that brought to mind the color of certain spruces at dusk; the characters in Andersen's paintings were often dressed like this, in colors from this spectrum. Poorly protected against the coolness beginning to rise from the earth, as the hour of the wolf was at hand, Myriam shivered. Then she pulled over her what was, from the night, warm and loving, and she drew away from the house, taking a trail that went through the pines. After about a hundred meters, she stopped.

The forest was sleeping. The chatter of the guests had caused the more fearful animals to flee, and the others, waiting for dawn, were slumbering. Several branches were split open, attacked by worms.

Then, something came. Feet or paws were moving through the wood, carelessly crushing dwarf raspberry and blueberry bushes. The echoes over the dark landscape revealed this movement, coming from the void toward Myriam. After seven or eight steps, the sounds took the form of a smudge: a vague, gray, frozen silhouette, scenting before it a presence, on alert. Myriam, too, was a statue on the lookout. The moon hid behind a cloud. The young girl could no longer see or hear a thing. Suddenly she detected a soft musk, the warm odor of a cervid. Filled with emotion, she whispered a few friendly words. The beast was frightened; it jumped, avoiding a tree and approached, as if by mistake, Myriam, then smashed the plant-covered doors blocking its escape. Everything vanished.

Myriam waited patiently for the moon's resurrection, then she headed for the house. She met up with her mother on the way. They took each other by the arms and returned to the dining room.

The night's intensity was waning.

They looked at each of Andersen's canvases.

Myriam recounted what she had seen: perhaps a reincarnation of her father. She didn't know if she could dream of that and, without daring say it to her mother, she held herself on the edge of such a hope. Warda was also pondering this: she felt like shuddering.

Now, the dawn not having yet arrived, neither woman spoke; they floated at the edge of paintings titled *The Rewarded Greenery*; *Left Wing*, *Right Wing*; *The Return of the Stag*, and no one spoke.

III Tarchalski

Hoffmann had been admitted to the Committee of Vigilance in January, and, in June, he was given the Wellensohn case. He undertook his investigations with tact, succeeding at establishing Wellensohn's guilt in several escape attempts and thus giving the authorities new reasons to transfer Wellensohn and extend his relegation, but he neglected to make the prisoner confess to his prewar oneiric bonds with his wife, Samira Wellensohn, and so he was reproached for his negligence.

Beneath somewhat relaxed exteriors, Hoffmann had a suicidal temperament; four years later, he hanged himself from a tree branch, far from the well-delimited perimeter where he had been sent to chop wood, and, despite the search party organized to find him, he escaped discovery. For three seasons his body swung at a great height, invisible from the ground, swept by snowy winds, brushed and beaten by larch needles, dancing among howling clouds when blizzards began to roar in the vicinity, rigorously tatterdemalion and unmoving in calm weather, more pockmarked than a thimble. At the end of the following spring, he came loose and fell. Because of a coincidence on which it would be frivolous to reflect, Wellensohn was part of the clearing team that witnessed the plummeting cadaver, or what remained of it: a few twisted scarecrow-like scraps, a jumble of bones. It rustled from branch to branch and was swallowed by the grass that flourished at the forest's edge.

Wellensohn had raised his eyes and spied among the conifers a swift-moving, brown mass, which he first thought might have been a clumsy bear that had slipped from some peak. Then he reasoned with himself: beneath their cumbersome exterior, these animals are acrobats; talented and clawed, they fall only when shot. He walked toward the impact. A man named Tarchalski accompanied him. They were nearly alone in this part of the woods; they were preparing to uproot stumps.

Massourian, through his binoculars, was watching them. The grasses were in full bloom, shoulder-high; they had a vernal elasticity and responded to all human intrusion with a green

and verbose resistance, juicy and strongly scented. So they rose before the wall of the first larches. Massourian, who had received a degree in botany before pursuing a career as a disciplinarian, examined the images—enlarged eighteenfold by his regulation optics—stems and inflorescences, and muttered, from where he was, some names: milky buckskin, gravel soapweed, giant absinthe, malviol, feather urchin, fingervine, crow's breath, rat tail, sablestar.

Tarchalski and Wellensohn sank into the magnificent grassbed. They could scarcely be seen.

Before them, now, was the pile of bones and human remains that, despite the mildness of the surrounding weather, gave off smells of cold rags, icy waves.

Tarchalski bent down. He didn't touch anything. He stood back up. He had heard about dead shamans that other shamans would hoist to the tops of immense trees, so they could decay in complete harmony with nature, before the carnivores of the sky and before the sky. He advanced the hypothesis that mystical powers had once flowed through this carcass. He evoked nights beneath the full moon, heavy smoke, dances dedicated to weasel and ermine muzzles. Then, realizing that he was chattering to himself, he grumbled and sealed his lips.

A chalky pallor on his cheeks, Wellensohn expressed no opinion. He was suddenly wavering on the border between memory and awareness, like the insane or the recently deceased, not knowing where to place reality, for he was encountering elements of a dream that had haunted him the night before, which he had forgotten, but whose memory was now rushing into his retinas and, from within, was overlaying images that were mixed with those from the day. The situation and characters were identical.

Only the setting was different: an unkempt sandpit, like the ones that exist behind beaches, where no one rests or swims.

Wellensohn wavered again for a few moments, then he leaned over the unknown corpse. At first, he did not show any repugnance. He said:

“The ring hasn’t been taken. Why don’t you pick it up, Tarchalski? If it has an inscription, we’d certainly learn. . . We’d know who. . .”

Then, he turned away. He was holding back a retch.

There was before them a ghastly structure which must have been a woman: an actress, perhaps, or a dancer who had held a role in a play about animals, since she was wearing a birdlike costume; everything was faded, but a few downy patches remained. They were splendid, parrot green, rainbow green. Her upper limbs were crossed, deboned, evidently extracted from their clavicular housing; her feathers were covered in blood and burn marks; her legs were bare up to mid-thigh, disfigured by scrapes and bruises.

The ring, it’s true, had not been removed. Tarchalski hurried to slide it off, then to open it: it possessed, like certain pieces of expensive jewelry, a miniscule cache. During this time, Wellensohn was examining the mask that enveloped the victim’s face, though he didn’t dare move it, out of fear of smelling the viscosities of faceless flesh. After the ordeal, the murderer or murderers had suffered a last-minute crisis of scruples; they had collected somewhere the dancer’s mask and used it to cover up the horror of what they had done; finally soothed, they had spared this strange, white face, with its curved, ibis-like beak.

Tarchalski had loosened the screw thread. He turned the object so it would be illuminated by the sun and deciphered the inscription; from the first word, his voice sank. Each syllable seemed to suffocate beneath a layer of dust, as if the consonants had aged several months in his mouth before emerging.

“What?” said Wellensohn. “Speak up, Yasar. I can’t. . .”

“*Love and fidelity,*” Tarchalski murmured. “*Love is not a meaningless word, Kynthia & Yasar Tarchalski.*”

At forty-six, Yasar Tarchalski had the physiognomy of a deserter, but, beneath his skin and eyes—his smoky skin, his rebellious eyes—he had lost none of his tenderness for beings and things. He cleared his throat for a comment that never came, then focused on practical

tasks. He had placed his bag on the sand, and he stooped down to retrieve from it a pair of pliers and some cotton, since, in this dream, the two men practiced forensics.

He turned his back on Wellensohn. An initial sob attacked his shoulders, then a second. Then he rested the ring on a wad of cotton deep inside a transparent box. Beneath the unlabeled glass, the jewel sparkled.

Dragonflies rattled near his hands. They were blue. When he finished writing the label, they disappeared.

Love is not a meaningless word, fidelity is not a meaningless word; Tarchalski stuffed the box into the bag; he stood up straight and, not even wiping his cheeks, where tears were quickly evaporating, he took a step backward and faced Wellensohn, wanting to show that he had overcome his weakness and that Wellensohn, if he wished, could talk to him.

But Wellensohn did not unclench his teeth.

There they were, surrounded by gray dunes and ugly vegetation sprouting from the poor soil, two orphans nearing fifty, one goateed, the other shaven, pensive vulture silhouettes whose image clouded, then cleared again, then, once more, turned cloudy, and finally Wellensohn broke the silence and swallowed his saliva and said:

“I share your pain, Yasar. I know it won’t make you feel better, but I give you my most sincere condolences.”

Massourian was reading their words in the image formed by his binoculars, consulting in his botanist memory the pages dedicated to the nomenclature of ugly plants, those that grow in siliceous and salty soil, and he identified half-unearthed tubers, rubbery and creeping stalks, unsightly flowers, and he named them: phlegmatic coramom, mooncockle, sandy firecracker, aromatic bulltongue, grooved miter.

IV Khorassan

Anita Negrini saw Jean Khorassan after his death, a long time after, though she didn't recognize him. His face passed before her, and an unconscious stirring of her memories caused her to examine the general form of his skull, his dull coloration, and to dedicate to this examination a little more than the second's fraction she ordinarily spent wiping bones with antiseptics. But nothing clicked into place and, the following night, she dreamed, as she often did, of Khorassan, without anything to establish a connection between the oneiric episode and what she had perceived in reality, while awake.

Khorassan and she held each other tightly; they had successfully returned to Peking, they walked once more through the Chinese capital. The summer was nearing its end. They left the Andingmen metro station just as a strong gust of dust began to crackle; the loess-packed air swiftly brought along its fog; nothing was visible, neither the avenue, nor the walls of the Yonghegong monastery. They were pressed side-against-side, Jean and she, indissolubly they huddled together and protected each other. Having decided not to go back down into the underground to take shelter, they settled for turning their backs to the wind; the noises of traffic sounded covered in felt; the sand beat and struck against the two united, stooped, and loving silhouettes. The dream then took a turn for the less static, unclear events separated them, an awful fear forced both of them to run into the monastery, into the twilit alleyways. From time to time, they found themselves in rooms that had neither door nor window, sometimes reading aloud from books in a language they didn't know and sometimes prostrate, not responding whenever someone knocked on the wall; but they hadn't slid into another universe, and, while distant and glimpsing no more than brief flashes of each other, they still felt physically close, still open to words or thoughts. Later came Khorassan's arrest; he was surrounded by uniforms, taken away by non-Chinese police. Whatever moments of action there might have been, the dusty wind continued to blow. On the nape of Anita Negrini's neck, the hard silica tingling didn't cease and, when she opened her eyes, her pillow was covered in sand.

Anita Negrini had worked at the ossuary for the past twelve years. Her assistants were two men whose minds had not survived in captivity. The first was called Sternhagen; he claimed to have been, before his incarceration, an expert in mammal extinction, then a deepwoods shaman, then a bandit chief. The second, Pilgrim, had been a specialist in aurochs; he had been transferred to a predeparture zone in order to give him the chance to compose his autocritique, but he hadn't been able to write what was asked of him, and, after two years, his fragmentary confession was confiscated and he was assigned to cellar work. These two sick men exchanged disturbed, sad words before Anita Negrini; they accomplished their labor without making a fuss, but without an excess of zeal, without ascribing any more importance to existence and language, and, sometimes, obeying compulsive instructions born in their darkness, they embezzled a vertebra, an eyebrow arch, a few paltry pieces of ivory; thus perhaps they hoped to decorate their homes or their solitude. Whenever she noticed, and she always noticed, since she kept scrupulous accounts of the remains, Anita Negrini paid a visit to Sternhagen or Pilgrim's residence, she asked them to return what they had stolen, and they returned it; she went back to the ossuary, where she lived, with, at the bottom of her supply basket, a white tibia, a jaw veined with thin cracks, and she placed it back on the right pile, in the corresponding hole, then she erased from the records the ephemeral mention of escape she had been obligated to note.

The day after the day Jean Khorassan's skeleton was received and cleaned, several bones went missing.

Pilgrim's house creaked; it always felt, on entering, like being lost in the hold of a deteriorating boat. Anita Negrini went there. Pilgrim and Sternhagen were drinking tea while observing a handful of phalanges. They weighed them in the crux of their palms to conjure and evaluate the personality of the deceased, which formed the center of their conversation. They were sitting on the ground, since there weren't any chairs in the room. They blew on the reddish

and scalding tea and, when they were quiet, they listened to the creaking of planks. Anita sat in turn.

"I knew him," said Sternhagen, "He passed himself off as a bandit chief. I was under his orders. I killed under his orders."

"Who?" asked Pilgrim.

"What?" said Sternhagen.

"Killed who?" asked Pilgrim, pouring himself more tea.

"Bandit chiefs," said Sternhagen.

Anita Negrini went to look for an empty bowl in the sink, rinsed it, and presented it to Pilgrim. He then smiled at her kindly. He filled the bowl to the brim, then brought up to her eyes a phalanx that had a bullet in it, from one moment or another of its organic plenitude, when it had been surrounded by flesh.

"He suffered," said Pilgrim.

"We murdered all the bandit chiefs," Sternhagen suddenly explained plaintively.

"Don't worry," said Pilgrim. "This is just between us. No one's asking you for an autocritique."

Then he continued his examination of the tiny bone.

"He was in a room with no doors or windows for a long time," he said.

"Jean," whispered Anita Negrini.

"Sorry?" said Pilgrim.

"When he was enclosed in that hermetic room, did he dream?" asked Anita. "Were there cracklings of sand on the other side of the walls? Did he walk with me through Peking?"

"I don't know," said Pilgrim.

They drank their tea with salt and, since there was no milk in the stores on the street, they substituted a bit of margarine foam; the taste was less than excellent. Anita Negrini breathed irregularly for a moment, then she calmed herself. She finished her bowl and listened

to the nothingness, the rumble of the street, the planks' complaints, then she demanded that the two men return to her the totality of the bones they had purloined. They complied without protest. She wrapped the ossicles in a plastic bag and tucked them away. Sternhagen said:

"I killed many under his orders."

"He wasn't the one who gave the orders," said Anita.

"Don't worry," said Pilgrim. "No one's asking you for an autocritique either."

V Larsen

Several days before his release, and after he had already unstapled the calligraphies decorating the wall above his bunk, Larsen was called before the director. He walked briskly under the flamboyant maple foliage and, once he had crossed the first barrier, stepped onto the forest path that went to the director's cottage.

Judging by the foul smoke spat out by the chimney, someone, in the room meant for visitors, was trying to light a stove with damp wood: an idiot, maybe a soldier, or the director himself. Larsen watched the smoke and made a few ironic appraisals. The man escorting him also gave his opinion. From his lips emerged several wreaths. The sweltering temperatures of August were long past; the frosts of autumn prowled around shacks, and, every morning, a rumor spread, denied but insistent, that the supply office was going to start distributing extra blankets and warmer clothes.

Larsen hunched to keep warm. In front of the house, he stood up straight, buttoned the collar of his shirt. Then he entered. The guard waited near the door: sitting on a step, he patiently contemplated the piled logs in the woodshed, or the mushrooms growing from stumps, or the tufts of dying grass, or the pale pink stain of an unplucked raspberry, aborted and belated. After half an hour, Larsen came back out. He went in reverse: he presented himself to the checkpoint once again, he once again went through the fence. The guard walked with him for three meters, then they parted ways.

Now, Larsen was back among us, behind the barrier, on the right side of the barbed wire: on the side of the camp that allows for the savoring of the possibility of an outside. He smiled pensively, expressing nothing but a bit of weariness and without opening his mouth. He headed toward the barracks and, once at his bed, he lay down.

At that same moment, due to an indiscretion by the guard, a rumor circulated that a disciplinary article had been invoked to prolong Larsen's stay among us.

Larsen could be seen through the barracks window. He was smoking. For several minutes he remained in the same position, pensive, periodically bringing to his face the dirty, earthy cylinder of tobacco we insisted, out of habit, on calling a cigarette, and expelling whirls of gray. Then, he rose, and, after using a ballpoint pen to write a few words on a piece of paper, he pinned it to the partition. He immediately went back to bed and fell asleep.

An hour later, I went to wake Larsen. The meal was being served in the canteen and it is impossible to save a portion of food for a detainee who has not received special dispensation from the infirmary. I read on the paper the following words: PARAGRAPH TEN: NO LAND OF REFUGE. I WILL STAY WITH YOU.

“Do you want to eat?” I asked, shaking his shoulder.

“I was in the middle of a dream,” he said.

“What about?” I asked.

Larsen told me his dream, then we left to eat. The rice was fine. On behalf of everyone in the barracks, as if Larsen were a new arrival, Parkhill presented him with several gifts: two apples, a few cigarettes, a bag of raisins, some paper, a letter from an imaginary fiancée, Swain’s thesis on pangolin fossils. We chatted, joking about the director and his stove. Someone proposed trying another seminar on Chinese theatre and finally putting on a scholarly reading of the *Bardo Thödol*, the Book of the Dead, which by some miracle the camp library possessed a copy of.

I don’t know what else I could add to make that day any clearer.

Nevertheless, now that Larsen is no more, I would like to try and recreate his dream.

He was dressed in a mendicant’s robe; people whose authority he respected were encouraging him to push a membranous curtain and, backed by the chorus of their advice, he did so, alone, in a dilapidated hallway. The squawking of objurgations crumbled against his back and died down. Having breached a sort of dim, temperatureless airlock, he continued into a cellar and, as often happens in life as well as in nightmares, he immediately regretted the

irreversibility of what he had done; behind him, the door disappeared, the wall was completely smooth; he would have to find another way out by walking through the nearly impenetrable darkness.

He groped his way forward. Someone fell on him, heaping rebukes, someone he had once known, it seems—perhaps a classmate, or a researcher from the same laboratory, or a monk living in a cell adjacent to his own. He responded to the man's attack. They grappled clumsily, awkwardly. During the fight, Larsen felt his past losing its consistency; his memory regurgitated names he could no longer identify, hazy and blurred details. He then found himself standing and facing the other man, out of breath, understanding that only the other could guide him through the black space. Sullenly, they both began to advance across the sooty ground. No walls stood in their way. They kept at this for days, sleeping on their feet or bickering, and, despite their bad mood, chatting. The subject of their conversations had something to do with the *Bardo Thödol*; they argued bitterly over the duration of the journey from death to rebirth. In reality, the journey did not match the forewarnings of the sacred texts; discovering, in this blasphemous assessment, a terrain conducive to reconciliation, the two men came to a machine that resembled a jukebox; there were voices coming from it, fragments of memories that belonged to no one or that had been subjected to such a hideous encryption that no one wished to claim them. They sat in front of the machine and silently ruminated on the power of fate. I then appeared and shook them by the shoulders.

That is all for the visions that illuminated Larsen's slumber.

VI Özbek

Toghtaga Özbek, my grandfather—whom camp comrades later nicknamed Özbek the Great, and who later still, on December 9th, 1959, according to the accounts of witnesses such as Khrili Gompo and Lutz Bassmann, passed away during a shamanic trance—wiped away the sweat trickling down his forehead, made a remark in Mongolian, and then was silent. He was riding a chestnut horse, a peaceful beast that was nonetheless skittish from the smell of death whirling around the carts filled with the wounded. The man to whom he had spoken wheezed and moved the fingers of his left hand. The top of his uniform was soaked in blood. Özbek brushed away the flies that had gathered on the scarlet compresses. They buzzed in zigzags and quickly returned.

It was August 1914, on the road to Ostrowiec, close to the wooded heights marked on the general staff's maps with the abusive appellation Bald Mountains. To the south, the cannon rumbled with such regularity that one ended up no longer hearing it. Like everywhere in Poland, the Russians were ceding ground, abandoning behind them fresh graves and including in their retreat a considerable number of mutilated and tattered soldiers. Since the beginning of the hostilities, they had done nothing but recoil under Austrian pressure. They recoiled in the heat, beaten by the sun, with relative precision among the ripened wheat, or, in nocturnal hours, on forest trails overwhelmed with the smell of soldiers and languid the droppings of owls, of ants. Whether they were still uninjured or already maimed, the men's skin was brown with dust, their eyes worried, irritated. The conviction had settled in them that they were participating in a futile endeavor and that the war, which had just begun, would end very soon on a shameful capitulation. Each hoped, obviously, to be one of the vanquished, but safe and sound, demobilizees.

Özbek rubbed his face to chase away fatigue and, as he straightened his cap which had slid over his eyebrows, he saw in the sky a dirigible.

The object was flying over the fields, the untouched hills, the clusters of trees. From lack of habit, it was impossible to determine the height at which it was maneuvering. It plunged behind the tops of the poplars bordering the road and then resurfaced. It was floating, wakelessly it drifted through the blue, it defied chasms and gravity. It was a marvelous, silvery-gray invention, fully independent of the current massacre: a door finally open to the purest of dreams, a promise of beauty for decades to come. That is what my grandfather saw.

The men forgot their morosity, the least wounded lifted their heads. A soldier began to wave his jacket, he held it at the end of his arm to make it move in huge circles. The hierarchy reprimanded him: we do not greet enemy vehicles, we do not give them signs of intelligence. The soldier returned to the line. They then heard, behind the convoy, the rifles of elite snipers targeting the firmament. Unshakeable, the German machine was leaving the area surrounding Ostrowiec, it was heading south, toward Sandomierz where the battle was raging; no projectile had damaged it.

The poplars shuddered under a gust of wind. Toghtaga Özbek's sorrel stepped aside, then, once more, approached the cart piled with the gravely wounded.

"Djogane," my grandfather said.

Among the dying was Djogane Gungalav, a Buryat who, three years prior, had made the mistake of obeying the orders of recruitment officers, when he could have disappeared forever into the formidable expanses of taiga surrounding the miniscule military outpost where he had been brought for his first night in the Tsarist army. With the hope that he would keep an important part of himself intact and untarnished, the man had, like Özbek and like all of us, lied to the authorities about his name. However, this was not enough to stave off misfortune. A shell had severed his arm at the shoulder, smashed his shoulder blade all the way to the lung, and, at present, his chances of survival were null. From time to time, he answered my grandfather with a shudder of his left hand.

“Djogane,” my grandfather said in Mongolian. “Can you hear me? Men now know how to navigate through the sky. . . Don’t die. . . You have to witness this and whatever comes next. . . The war is going to come to an end. . . Soon, the revolution will sweep capitalism away. . . The owners will share their lands, their factories. . . Armies will wither away. . . Among the people, brotherhood will reign. . .”

The flies were buzzing, disturbed by my grandfather’s gestures, but they did not renounce their ignominious and painful repast. Toghtaga Özbek moved beside the wounded and spoke. Since he was whispering above one of the dying, the officers tolerated his using a language lacking in Slavic roots.

“Don’t let yourself be beaten, Djogane,” my grandfather continued. “Soon we will all fly in silent flying machines. . . There will be no more borders beneath our wings. . . You’ll be able to shout your true name over the taiga, and the crows and fish eagles of Lake Khövsgöl will welcome you. . . I’m telling you. Dying’s not worth it. . . This century’s coughed up some blood, but from now on it’ll be luminous until the end. . . The world revolution is going to spread across every continent like a trail of powder. . . In September or October, when the armies receive the order to disperse, we’ll cut down all our terrible leaders. . . The planet will be run by the workers. . . Are you following, Djogane? No one will be victimized by the rich anymore. . . Intelligence will rule. . . Scientists will make your arm grow back and they’ll build happiness for everyone. . . The sky will tremble beneath the caress of millions of dirigibles. . . We. . .”

My grandfather stopped. The flies were swarming. He swatted them away again. Djogane was no longer listening.

In the afternoon, Toghtaga Özbek was detached from the convoy, and was seen standing guard at a metallurgic factory in Ostrowiec. It was there that he met Gabriella Bruna, my grandmother. After the war and the revolution, they found each other again and lived together. It was not happily ever after. All around them, the floods of death were unreceding. Intelligence did not rule. They helped to fight the inconceivable, and, for lack of any other option,

they loved it. Sometimes, my grandfather would bring up what he called the dream of the dirigible. For a long time they spoke of it to each other and repeated it in secret, with variations. They were extremely close. Then they were separated.

VII *Epilogue*

We took Irina Kobayashi Street and walked the length of the tall structures of the Zoological Museum, trading remarks on the extinction of species, speaking about the great proletarian insurrections that unfurled too late, if they even ever unfurled, to save the wild yak, the lemur, and the anteater, and Jean had begun, as he often did, to construct poetic bridges between the reality of our dreams and the reality of the world of illusions, and I knew that he was about to mention the literature of the Colony and cite a number of names dear to us—Khadjbakiro, Wernieri, Ellen Dawkes, Loo Kwee Choo—when we heard a motorbike change speeds at the end of the Fossil Wing and roar behind us. One second later, I felt a sting beneath my left hip, another at the base of my neck. Jean lunged, trying to take hold of me, but his hand shattered. Then we were pierced by a deafening hail. The motorbike had slowed. Its passenger was making an effort to realign the machine-pistol wedged against his leather abdomen; the recoil had caused it to drift off course. The motorbike stopped. I was slumped near Jean. The shooter leaned forward and, again, sprayed our bodies. The task took some time to complete.

Something slowed the upwelling of pain. However, I was still aware of having been shredded to the marrow. I lifted an eyelid made spongy by hemorrhage and I observed what was unfolding outside my flesh. The killers had already left the scene. Jean was lying against me, disfigured, whimpering slowly and feebly, as if he was holding back vomit. His lower jaw was gone, his tongue dangling over the sidewalk's glistening asphalt.

We had foreseen such a scenario. The roles had been written long before. Whichever of the two of us was still capable of speech had to try and construct one last image in which we could both dissolve, as a farewell.

I searched in vain for the vision we had chosen to sweeten our parting. My memory was failing; it was blocked by the problems of mammals. But finally, without transition, I saw an image of Hong Kong.

I mumbled a few sounds beyond the bubbles and foam.

“Jean, do you remember the entrance to Victoria Harbour, the day we arrived by hydrofoil?”

I don't know if Jean heard me.

“Do you remember?” I persisted. “The fishers were on strike. . . The plane's engines were turned off. . . The port was blocked by hundreds of boats. . . The sun was blinding. . . All the masts were sporting red flags. . .”

I don't know if he heard me, but this was the end, and now we were there: enveloped in the same light.