

LECH MAJEWSKI

METAPHYSICS

A NOVEL



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I



1

What does it mean, that someone exists? Is it just that I can see them alive and moving, talk with them, touch them? I can't touch you, although I can touch those few personal effects that you imprinted with the shape of your body – your high-heeled shoe with a worn out sole, black bra, wax earplugs. Your favourite dress, the one you wore under your coat during our last walk round the Ilia de Pietro, no longer embraces your body – it lies here on the bed, provoking me. It's ended up in the bin a few times, once I took it to the Salvation Army...

2

All I know about the first three months after your funeral is that I spent them in Venice. When I returned to London, I shut myself up in my flat and lay or slept in front of the TV set, digesting the most stupid programmes, i.e. everything television has to offer. Every day I committed hara-kiri with the blunt knife of my television set, until I had eviscerated my head of any pain. And I slept all the time. I slept a lot. Sleep prolongs life; it conserves life, paradoxically bringing us closer to death. The word 'cemetery', after all, comes from the Greek, meaning sleeping chamber...

Humans sleep for a third of their lives, usually twenty-five years. And they dream for five. That's when they abandon their bodies, walk through walls, rise above the waters and devour their own hearts. At night they throw off the three-dimensional shells of their bodies and enter the world of higher dimensions, to do things

so beautiful and so cruel that they laugh like children and scream in terror. They inhabit the garden of delight and awe, and their senses, returning as they awaken, do everything they can to deny these journeys. Because they have control over the first three dimensions, while the higher ones are beyond their grasp. The lower the dimension, the greater the degree of slavery. Life is torment, says Krishnamurti, death is liberation. Do the dying, like the sleeping, throw off their bodies to enter a higher dimension permanently?

3

When I couldn't sleep any longer, I went on hunger strike. I ate nothing for eight days, drinking only tea with sugar. I switched off the television and for five months read absolutely everything I could find on the subject of death.

I read dozens of books, but got the impression they were full of nonsense. Wishful thinking at best. When discussing death, the writers, poets and philosophers curled up like hedgehogs and cringed away. Generally towards religion. Those who believed that there's nothing after death, only emptiness, darkness, a void, wrote without conviction. They simply couldn't be convinced of something that was unprovable. There was only a line from Voltaire and some of Seneca's remarks in your notebook...

„We don't meet our death suddenly, it approaches us gradually, so that we die a little every day. Each day some fragment of life leaves us, and even when we're growing, life is getting shorter. Our childhood is over, then our adolescence. However much time has passed

since yesterday is gone; they day we're spending now also belongs partly to death. We meet death at an appointed hour, but it takes a while to get there." I find comfort in this extract, from one of Seneca's letters to Lucilius, written in your notebook. Then this, his condolences for Polibius: „The road which leads to death is one common to us all. Why do we cry over the inevitability of death? The dead don't leave us, they precede us. Believe me, the necessity of death contains great happiness. Nothing is certain, even for one day." The extract from Seneca's letter to Lucilius, written in your notebook, calms me. I wake up in the middle of the night and copy it out a few times. Writing to you, talking to you.

4

I have to speak, to talk to you. Nobody else would listen. People don't listen to others, just to themselves. And they sift through the words of others to find what resonates in themselves. I know that you can hear me. After all, you planted yourself in me as seeds of love and desire, and through their constant growth you talk with me. You speak inside me, and I answer. And even though you're gone and your biology is dead, your thoughts have taken root in the barren earth of mine.

With you I was often silent, ashamed of my inability to express myself. We carry other people's words in our train of thought along tracks laid by someone else, unable to say anything honest, even at confession. I never liked trains condemned to the rails, or cars dependent on roads. That's probably why I studied at the Maritime College and qualified as a ship's architect.

Before I met you I studied mathematics, physics, astronomy, any rational, measurable science – not just because of my profession, but also for the sheer pleasure of it. For me, knowledge was intellectual entertainment, and only your death made me re-examine all the basic questions. No, I was never fond of contemplating generalities – they were fearfully vague, stupefyingly incomprehensible, but, when in book after book I failed to find any reliable knowledge about death, I ventured into the realm of metaphysics.

5

What is death? The disintegration of matter? The destruction of the ego's consciousness? Or maybe just separation – someone's disappearance from our sight and feelings? How many people have I buried alive, and how many have buried me, although I am, I feel, I think and I'm writing these words? There were strong bonds between us, we lived together and experienced similar emotions, then, suddenly and without warning, we stopped meeting, phoning, writing. Usually for trivial reasons: someone left, changed address, said some unkind words or looked at somebody the wrong way. Or, more often, seemed to look the wrong way, or we heard from someone that they'd said something or other and so bridges built over months and years collapsed and sank into the river of routine, and neither side seemed eager to rebuild them.

The only difference between those deaths, apart from the obvious physical one, concerns potential. There are a lot of friends and acquaintances I'll probably never meet again, but the potential is there – one fine day, I'll turn a corner and bump into one of them,

slap him on the back and go to the pub, then we'll drown ourselves in memories. Or some day I'll build, or buy, a house on the Virgin Islands, on St. Croix in Frederiksted, and invite my friends there on holiday. And it's irrelevant that none of that will ever happen, and that when our paths do cross, we talk banalities and keep a safe distance with a howareyou, and a notbadhowsyoursself, looking round nervously, unconsciously searching for an escape route.

So is death the end of potential? One of life's paths has been bricked off and slapped with a death certificate, is that it? But there are so many people who might be near, whom we might love, and we don't even know if they're in a different house, a different street or just through the wall.

6

I can hear you laughing. You find my awkward speculating so amusing. You're laughing inside me. I can hear you, so you're in me... Do you remember in Venice, two months before your death, how you cried out in your sleep? You woke up clinging on to me with all your might, feeling that our bodies had become one. Remember? You said that my body was an extension of yours. And I felt exactly the same. Remember? Darling, do you remember?

I remember. So that moment will live on as long as I'm capable of remembering.

Memory is life.

Memory...

7

“We remember things that have never happened, and couldn’t possibly have happened,” wrote Oscar Wilde. Memory constantly adjusts reality, picking out only that which it understands or finds interesting. A hundred people enter the same room and when they leave they remember a hundred different things. A botanist remembers the pot plants, a painter the colour of the walls, a lazybones the armchair, and a mathematician the geometric proportions of the pattern on the carpet. And if I relied wholly on my senses, I’d have recognised long ago that the degree of deformation of the past is great enough.

But my memory has become concrete. It has been caught in the eye of the camera – electronics seeing and taking notes on magnetic tape, remembering sound as well as sight, physical facts. I can freeze any frame, study it, contemplate it, and it’s more real than you. Because you no longer have physical form. It has disintegrated into purifying chemistry. At the bottom of a tree.

8

It’s amazing that a picture is more permanent than a body, a trace more permanent than a life, as if an entire complex realm of tissues, cells, molecules and atoms had come into being merely to fall apart, while the trace – a few electromagnetic reactions on a thin band of tape – survives.

I watch through piles of cassettes I'd recorded you on with an amateur video camera, and I can't decide. I don't know where to begin or how to do it, but I yearn to put together some form of film from all these fragments – a story about you.

I bought another video and connected it to the old one, now I'm trying to start editing. How can I sew up shreds of reality without throwing together a figure that masquerades as you? So that's why I started to take notes.

9

In the opening scene you're lying naked on the bed in our apartment on Riva dei Sette Martiri. In the background, the bulk of a passenger ship appears in the window. The ship is leaving Venice, and the sight of groups of passengers on board make you sit up on the bed and wave to them. The faces sailing past, your excitement, the closeness of the ship almost brushing against the windows, the taste of sea travel and the sweetness of separation all ensure that the scene, though out of focus and chaotic, is the quintessence of our life in Venice.

I remember the story about Marcel Duchamp, who spent the last twenty years of his life locked away in his New York studio. He was trying to create a realistic sculpture, covered in tanned leather and wax, of his Brazilian lover. Reclining lazily, thighs open, the memory of a few evenings of a cool European chess-player's brain being thawed by the heat of a South American body.

But after the first scene I don't know how to continue the editing. A feeling of powerlessness overcomes me. I am in pain, so much so that I want to take my dose of television and shove the videotapes into a drawer. And when I sit like that, empty, immobile, remembering your body, (Duchamp could touch his creation, he even lived with her – the FBI's lab discovered his DNA in traces of sweat, saliva and sperm on the sculpture's skin) I hear you say: "If you don't know where to start, start at the beginning."

10

Chronology? Why not. Some force ultimately arranged our existence into strange befores and afters, deluding us with cause-and-effect logic, and we, lost and estranged, believe that yesterday preceded today, and that tomorrow will replace yesterday, as if we didn't realize that tomorrow and yesterday are illusions corroborated only by the decay of matter which is the only universal time-piece, a power of the body but not the spirit.

Right. Chronology. In that case I should start at St. Catherine's Dock, a quay for yachts near Tower Bridge, that spring afternoon when the cold dampness of London permeated to the very bone. You were standing on a gangway between the old P&O ferry terminal and a barge settled on the oily bed of the Thames. Looking up at you – a figure silhouetted against the grey of the sky, with shapely calves extending from under a rust-coloured overcoat – I felt a yearning to approach you, introduce myself and invite you to the nearby cafe for a plate of hot soup. But I didn't move. I cowered on the beam suspended above the barge's hold and nothing

would have happened, you would have stepped back onto dry land and I into the hold, but fortunately, as usual in our relationship, you were brave enough to speak first.

It intrigued you how the barge could possibly be resting on sludge and not on the water, who had dragged it there and why, and my explanation that the Thames rises thirty feet twice a day failed to satisfy you.

“Thirty feet? But that’s a three storey building.”

“Yes.”

“You’re joking.”

“Not at all...” I clambered onto the gangway. “Luis Malten at your service,” I gave you my card.

“Bea Cossan,” you gave me your hand.

I kissed it, to your mild surprise, and thanks to this old-fashioned trick learnt from my Polish mother I caught the almond scent of your skin.

“Luis Malten, nautical engineer, 13 Evangelist Rd., Kentish Town, London NW5,” you read aloud and smiled. “Maybe we could go for some hot soup?”

You expressed my thoughts. And that amazing synchronicity began to accompany us right up until your death. No. It still accompanies us. Even now.

11

In the pub we were deafened by a lanky Irishman in seven league cowboy boots belting out Willie Nelson songs. So we ate without speaking. Fortunately some American tourists ordered up some

drinks for the cowboy, which kept him quiet for a while and we could talk, or rather you could.

You said you were thirty-two. An Italian born in London. Your parents were from Parma; your father was a doctor. You were temporarily living with your parents in Hampstead Heath, but you were renting a room in Drury Lane. No, no husband or boyfriend. You'd got a job in the National Gallery, and, when you weren't guiding tour groups or having paperwork forced on you, you were writing a PhD in Art History.

I observed your delicate hands and slender face, avoiding those penetrating, dusky pupils only half able to believe that such an attractive woman was single, without an entourage of males flocking around her, half amazed at you talking about your PhD when I'd spent the entire previous week consulting Professor Hoxter on the subject of my own: „The Principle of Co-ordinated Proportions of Hull Displacement in New Generation Container Vessels.” Container ships, the most symmetrical of boats, were ideal for my mathematical fun on the computer. As a Pythagorean, I believed that the Golden Section applied to hull proportions would give the optimum displacement, and I wanted to prove it, at the same time gaining praise for applying the Section in a new way.

The situation was ridiculous. I was uneasy, feeling dirty and greasy after five hours spent on the barge and I knew that you would go soon and that I wouldn't be able to make the slightest gesture, to do anything original in order to stop you. All I could do was drop my spoon, deliberately, to get another look at your legs. They stretched

out from the darkness under the table in flesh-coloured stockings, pressed together, tempting. They teased me so much that I wanted to bite them, but I only managed to pick up my spoon, mutter “sorry” and carry on listening.

You were convinced that I’d been exaggerating about the tides. I explained that the surface of the sea nearest to the moon is drawn towards it, and the most distant part drawn away, every twelve hours. The Thames in London is close to the sea, so reacts similarly. You pulled out a notepad and asked me to repeat what I’d just said. I repeated it. You wrote it down. I asked why.

“Because that’s what I’m here for. The moon is one of the heroes of my PhD.”

“Really? And what’s your PhD about?”

“The paintings of Hieronymus Bosch.”

12

Shivaun O’Casey, daughter of the Irish playwright Sean, was producing a fairly unusual spectacle based on Homer’s *Odyssey*. It was to take place on a barge converted into a floating theatre-ship for *Odysseus*. At that time I was working for a firm of marine architects as a consultant, and was hired to carry out the conversion work. I was tasked with designing a safe auditorium, around the small stage containing the mast – the set’s centrepiece.

Eliot Elms, the broad-shouldered tousle-haired director with the wild gaze of an Eastern genius, attempted to talk to me in Polish (it was no doubt thanks to my Polish roots that I’d got the job), but

with limited success as I'd left Poland aged four, and he aged twenty seven. I would occasionally speak Polish with my mother, or rather listen to her, understanding her language. Elms spoke bad English.

My father, a Welsh ships' mechanic, hadn't even known I'd been born. My mother, wanting to leave communist Poland at any cost, got in with the ginger mechanic at the Sailors' Centre in Gdynia, then later informed him she'd had a child. My father dragged us off to Wales and set us up in Port Talbot.

It was certainly thanks to all these sea-borne wanderings that I first looked on you from below, silhouetted against the sky, on the gangway that I'm now filming. The barge is gone now, the gangplank is attached to a pontoon carried on the high water, and, instead of you, there are two chubby girls tugging one another's pigtails. A sullen man in a sweaty Celtic top leans against the rail smoking a cigarette and gesturing at me to stop filming. The late afternoon has drawn parties of tourists to St. Catherine's Dock. They crowd the shops filled with teddies in crimson Beefeaters' uniforms and plates adorned with Tower Bridge. They wander around the riverbank, photographing and filming, just like me (I don't even know if a video camera 'films' or 'records', but I suppose it 'records', because you film films and record cassettes).

You said to "start at the beginning" and it begins here, although the beginning was never recorded. It lives on only in my memory, under my skull, and if anything happened to me there wouldn't be any beginning. Or would there? In the great brain that dreams us all? But I'm not sure. I doubt it. Therefore I'll film/record the emp-

ty places where we used to meet, and use them as they are now, without you, but with new faces and bodies to fill the emptiness you left behind. The microphone records, shards of conversations, my breath and short, fragmented sentences when I speak to you – I mean to the camera – things like “you remember you stopped here for a moment, “or” a couple were arguing here.”

Our first meeting was that short. Once roused from your own story you glanced at your watch and abruptly left, practically running off without saying goodbye. I was convinced that you’d vanish forever. But you turned back and invited me to a lecture at the National Gallery.

13

Windows darkened with blinds, aluminium-legged chairs, and a screen. I sweep across to the platform with my camera, make for an empty seat, then turn round and focus on what had been my chair, at the back, in the corner, right beside the fire-extinguisher and the mysterious pile of life jackets. What danger was there of drowning in a National Gallery lecture hall?

I put the camera away and sit in my chair. As I stare at the floor I can hear you talking about the moon as the water planet, roaming, transforming and directing every body of liquid (you look across at me and smile, there are maybe thirty people in the hall). You talk about the Thames, which rises and falls. You cite Firmicus Maternus, who claims in his *Matheseos* that the moon is the patron of aimless wanderings. You quote Hildegard von Bingen, who

writes that „when the moon waxes, the brain and blood expand, while as it wanes the human blood and brain shrink.” Finally you dust off John Wyclif, who announces in his prologue to the 1489 edition of the Aeneid that Englishmen are continuously travelling, because „we, the English, were born under the sign of the moon, which, never being stable, is always changing.”

You describe a fan, an accessory of both the Moon and women: „A fan grows and shrinks like the moon, controlled by a woman’s hand.” You widen the moon’s realm to the entire material world (matter being subject to endless alteration as well) and arrive at your favourite philosopher and mystic of the reborn Platonic Academy – Marsilio Ficino. His writings, preserved in the Hertogensbosch library of the Brothers of the Free Spirit, provided the painter with his inspiration. Ficino considers matter to be an endless source of evil, suffering and disease that fetters the spirit in degenerate shapes distorted by struggle and decay.

While I was listening to that lecture, in the rainbow of the slide projector illuminating the screen with details of Bosch’s paintings, I reflected on the fact that I’d met you standing on the barge when you were trying to find out something about the power of the moon. And long before that, I’d gone to study nautical architecture because one sleepless night, under a full moon in Swansea, I’d got a yearning to voyage across the water. Chance? A coincidence? Leibniz says there is no chance, only laws we’re not aware of. So it was some prophetic law that made you conclude your lecture with the topic of death in Paradise. Describing the triptych *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, you mentioned William Fraenger,

who'd researched the subtle apocrypha on the left wing, representing Eden – the concept of death separated from original sin, as death appears in Paradise in the form of a lynx devouring a badger at the foot of the Tree of Life.

„Death in Paradise?” you'd wondered aloud, „Before God condemned us to death?”

14

Bea. A strange name. At first, the spelling reminded me of the abbreviation for the former British European Airlines. But Bea is short for Beatrice, and just as your famous namesake led Dante through a vision of Paradise, you ushered me into the universe of Bosch. With the aid of his symbols you guided me through the experiences of Love, and her sister Death. But our march took a different route. Unlike Dante, Bosch had no interest in the idea of purgatory. He wasn't concerned with penance, but deliverance, not punishment, but reward for those who, instead of wallowing in the torment of waiting, discovered that entry into Paradise is possible here on Earth. In the garden of pleasure he liberated those who had previously suffered in the hell of their own souls, and he made that Utopia the central theme of his triptych, filling it with all types of creatures in an erotic dance of dreamy leisure and rest, as hostile to struggle as to loneliness.

His biblical Paradise, the Eden that we lost and should eternally weep for, makes up only the left-hand side of the triptych and, however peaceful it is, it stands empty. Apart from Christ, Adam and Eve, there's nobody there. Only animals. Some of them are only

partially formed – like the lizard with the writhing hindquarters of a snake, or the unicorn in the pool with the tail of a fish – or marked with the divine number three, like the three-headed salamander, the three-headed ibis, or the Tree of Life with its triple branches.

The Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, a snake entwined around it, can be seen in the background. Its fruit, still untouched, heralds the tortures of the judgements that drive the grinding machinery of Hell. When he painted his Eden, Bosch knew that the seeds of destruction lurked within it, and that Adam and Eve's road from the feet of Christ led straight to the Tree of Knowledge. That's probably why he painted a symbol of threatened motherhood in its shadow – the wild boar sow chasing off the basilisk – along with the unusual sight of death in paradise, which you talked about in your lecture.

In the hell portrayed on the other wing, the animals are replaced by people. The madness of their suffering stems from their desire to find themselves in a rational paradise, comprehensible to their shallow egoism, where gluttony and drunkenness, gambling, demonic music and the fires of war substitute expansion of the spirit. Bosch placed himself in the midst of this pandemonium as if to say that hell is unavoidable, and found inside everybody, since the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge did get eaten and not to differentiate between Good and Evil is impossible now. The best we can do is forget about the difference, to find ourselves in the earthly garden of bliss. Like those who've abandoned their worldly possessions and are naked in love in the garden where nobody tortures or kills an-

ybody, and where suffering, called „a bath of thorns and thistles”, is only a hidden dimension of tenderness. Death doesn't exist there, having been replaced by a symbiosis of plants, animals and people – their shared body intertwined in a harmonious dance, pleasing and attracting, satisfying the sensual delights of taste, smell and touch...

Beatrice. The Latin for 'she who spreads happiness'.

15

Carmen holding up a card and foreseeing her death, Carmen appalled, but following the voice of her heart regardless... Is it another coincidence, or a law, that the moment I begin a panoramic shot of the empty interior of the café near Covent Garden, someone puts on this aria and Jessye Norman's voice penetrates to the very bone of the noon silence?

We sat here after your lecture on Bosch, and I, in a haphazard way, told you how impressed I'd been by it. But then I was lying, since I hadn't really understood much of your talk. However, it was a safe enough way to express my fascination with you. You looked me straight in the eye, making me uneasy, and asked if I liked opera. I replied that I didn't, and you claimed that I was tone deaf. Nobody teaches us to listen, and that's something we have to learn, like driving a car.

You said you loved opera and had always wanted to sing. As a little girl you would shut yourself in the bathroom and half choke

yourself with your mother's stockings; you felt that for a face to issue a beautiful voice it had to be reddened and swollen. You went to music school and qualified as a lyric soprano, but on the verge of maturity you were stricken by inflammation of the vocal cords. After painstaking tests cancer of the larynx was suspected. You were due to undergo the operation, yet the suspicion turned out to be unfounded. But you never returned to singing. You feared that by singing you would attract death.

You divided voices into living and dead. Dead ones were those, which carried no feelings, as if the person singing had never experienced what they were singing about. Living voices were vibrant with the breath of pain and darkness, which emerged from the depths of the throat as if from a cave. Like the voice of Jessye Norman, which expires with the final words: "Encore! Encore! Toujours la mort!"

16

After Jenny, my wife of eight years, dumped me, I tended not to leave the house much. I would either sit by the shores of the Television Sea and gaze at the expanse of its water, lapped by the waves from satellites, or navigate the blue depths of the computer screen. Internet voyages, sex on the Net, or the endless geometric graphs which flowed from my printer onto my neglected floor, these were all like alcohol; they stupefied, numbed and finally lulled me to sleep with the quiet monotony of the evenings.

I was thirty-seven and felt like a pensioner. All the work I got I took home, avoiding people, offices, and meetings with clients. For seven years Jenny had assured me that I was the love of her life, and that her world would fall apart if we separated, and then, one Autumn morning, after managing to unjam the zip of her Egyptian travel bag, she informed me that it was all over, and that there was nothing I could do because she'd thought it over long and hard and discovered that her feelings had burnt themselves out, so now she felt charred and ashen (no, she didn't have anyone else, or want anyone, and had no plans, and wanted nothing apart from some peace and quiet). She went back to Nottingham, where she came from, moved in with her sister, a divorcee, and didn't reply to the phone messages, or letters, flowers or singing telegrams which I sent her without knowing what was going on, thinking it was only a temporary depression that had to end, even if only for practical reasons.

No, Jenny's world didn't fall apart. She didn't change her mind. We only saw each other one more time when I went to ask her back, and she sat silently holding her little nephew on her knee, shaking her head and crying, until finally asking me to leave. I spent seven whole years with Jenny. We lived under the same roof, slept in the same bed, ate at the same table. And? Today I don't even know where she is, or how she's doing. Is she dead? I don't think so, but I don't really know. For me she's dead, though. And for her I'm dead as well... That's how our loved ones die. Alive. Without death.

When I asked you why you were single, you answered that the men you'd met had been banal. They'd been immature, vain, had nothing happening in them that could attract you. Your longest ro-

mance had lasted less than two years. With a man whose name I don't even know. You left him, suffocated by his „lack of worlds“. So you chose a relationship with Bosch. Looking at his paintings absorbed you. Bosch excited you.

Worried at the emptiness inside me, I literally kept my mouth shut tight to stop you from feeling that I “had no worlds” either; the blinking blue eye of my computer could only be seen as an escape. Since meeting you I'd been swept by conflicting feelings: on the one hand I wanted you, fascinated by your grace, intellect and beauty, on the other hand I was desperately afraid of once again suffering the pain of separation. But in my wildest dreams I never suspected that you would leave me so soon, in a different way.

17

On Birdcage Walk I switch on the camera. I enter St. James's park, heading for the lake. Two weeks passed before you were able to meet me for a third time, for a walk along the path I'm now following. We walked slowly, stopping off to look at the park's black and white swans. When you passed trees, you touched their bark like it was a living creature. Your fingers explored their crevices and bumps while you lifted your head skywards inspecting the tree-tops.

You told me that a tree is a single great encyclopaedia of symbols, and that if you were sent to a desert island, you wouldn't need any books as long as there was even one tree growing there. Practically every canon of arcane knowledge, Tarot or Cabala, or mystical reli-

gious teachings, contains a tree, which encompasses three worlds. The dark underground of decay, hell, the writhing snake, toad and dragon hidden in the roots; the crown's distant untouchable world of branches and leaves allowing the light of Heaven to shimmer through like night stars; and the trunk, welding heaven and earth, like a human being caught between high and low good and evil, light and darkness, eternity and death.

„Everyone has their own tree assigned to them,” you said. „Adam’s tree lost him his place in Paradise, Christ was nailed to his, and Buddha, sitting under the Bo tree, spurned all evil forces. Trees, those blood vessels for subterranean water, lungs of the Earth exchanging their breath with ours, are also subject to the moon’s influence. That’s why Al-Uzza, the Arab Moon-goddess, was worshipped in Mecca in the form of a tree.”

You stroked the trunk of the ash tree that bowed over the southern edge of the lake, and I wanted to go over and stroke your hand. But I felt I’d frighten you off.

“That’s why I love Bosch,” you added, “He painted everything in the space of a few square metres, he didn’t leave anything out; light and darkness, heaven and hell, suffering and ecstasy – the supreme law of co-existing opposites.”

When I walked you to Trafalgar Square (the lunch break was almost over) you confessed that you wanted to make a film about Bosch’s Garden of Earthly Delights, the painting you felt closest to. No, you wouldn’t need any actors, props, script or anything apart from reproductions of the painting itself, which you’d wander over

with the camera uncovering more and more new details: “the Garden is so strange and mysterious when you display it a fragment at a time, whereas shown as a whole, like in the Prado, it paralyses you with its excess; it creates an impression of chaos as if there were nothing beyond *horror vacui* – the fear of emptiness.

“So why don’t you do it?” I asked.

“I don’t know how to,” you answered.

“I don’t either, but I think you write some kind of scenario, and the Museum sends it to the BBC.”

“I sent one a year ago. I didn’t get an answer.”

You’d grown impatient. You felt degraded that someone had ignored your project, without appreciating or maybe even reading it. You had already said goodbye and vanished through the doorway of the National Gallery when it struck me that I knew someone who made films. And maybe he would know how to help you.

I take a long, panoramic shot of an ash’s branches, in their July fullness. I zoom in on the trunk, as I touch it with my hand whose flesh blurs in the lens as it creeps among the grooves in the bark. It gradually becomes your hand, your touch from two years ago, and your tree.

18

The boat left St. Catherine’s Pier at different times, depending on the water level on the Thames. Production of the *Odyssey* was thus subject to the moon’s influence; so it wasn’t the producer or direc-

tor who decided on the play's starting time, but the ebb and flow chart printed on the back of the tickets. O'Casey abandoned my barge idea, claiming she couldn't afford it and, in its place, she had hired a pleasure boat called the London Sparrow. With benches of nickel and formica, that looked as much like a Greek ship as London did like Ithaca, however it provided shelter from the rain and was incomparably easier to steer than the ungainly barge.

I remember your surprise when I led you on board. You hadn't imagined that I had anything to do with this spectacle, much talked about in London. Or how much it owed to Bosch's symbolism: a ship dependent on the moon, a mythical voyage over water, and Hades wrapped in dark drapery on the lower deck – all these elements matched the themes in the painting.

The spectacle began in Hades, where Odysseus summoned the ghosts of Agamemnon, Achilles and Eurydice from the darkness, and spoke to them in the resounding cadences of the hexameter, to the accompaniment of the waves licking the boat's sides. I don't remember exactly how the action unfolded, as I was looking for Elms who said that there would be plenty of time in the natural breaks, when the boat reached each subsequent 'island', to discuss the project of your film.

The vessel's P.A. system wasn't too effective, but somehow I made out Odysseus' announcement that we were about to hear the sirens' song. And we did. Under the northern span of London Bridge sang a quartet of girls in white dresses, as Odysseus tried to tear himself free of the bonds placed on him by the oarsmen. He had

ordered them to stop their ears up with wax and lash him to the mast.

The quickly falling dusk, the glaring reflectors illuminating the facades of the Thames side buildings, the growing collection of onlookers and the uncertainty over where and when the next action would present itself all caused the audience to mill about like over-excited children. Elms knew his moment, and it was just then that he appeared and sat down with us.

I introduced you to him. He buried his gaze in your delicate neck and asked for your impressions. Of course you were fascinated, but you kept your distance, which made him start talking in an obvious attempt to impress you. He cursed the sponsors who hadn't invested in his immortal vision, and the actors who'd refused to take part, fearing the tantrums of the weather. You listened without listening, or feigned indifference, and I thought that the best thing I'd done, when faced with that same attitude from you, was to stay quiet.

The boat sailed under Southwark and Blackfriars Bridge, and right after Waterloo Bridge, below Cleopatra's Needle, landed at a rampart stocked with soup kitchens and Coca Cola vending machines. The crew leapt ashore and tore into the hamburgers served up by Lampetia and Faetuza. We'd reached the isle of Helios. Odysseus warned his companions not to consume the meat of the Sun-god's bulls, lest they tempt misfortune, but in vain. Moments later the oarsmen were writhing on the deck, in the throes of death. Only half of them survived. Not for long. As the vessel meandered past

the Houses of Parliament, the goddess Circe turned some of them into pigs.

Elms orchestrated the action with tiny movements communicating approval or disapproval to the actors. Conscious of his role as the Demiurge, he stalked through the audience with an air of authority. During the scene with Circe, he livened up:

“Did you read in the papers about our adventure here last Friday?”
I had read it, but you shook your head in denial.

“No? Really?” he asked, with worry and surprise, “The whole of London’s talking about it.”

„About what?” you asked.

“Margaret Thatcher... She was giving a speech in the grounds of Parliament. Everybody was there. And when she proposed a toast, radio interference from Circe’s microphone made Maggie tell them how she’d changed people into swine.”

You smiled and stayed silent. He was obviously embarrassing you. So far you hadn’t mentioned a word about the film project. When the boat turned round under Lambeth Bridge, I decided that I would say something. I tried. Badly, since I didn’t know or understand enough about it. Fortunately you took over the reins. Your words, the very timbre of your voice transported him into bliss. Me too, but seeing your attention directed at him I felt the monster of jealousy for the first time. It awoke slowly from its sleep, induced by my loneliness under the cold blinking eye of the computer. Those few meetings of ours had been too superficial and cut off from reality to be able to stir it, but now...

You explained to Elms the idea of the Garden of Delights, an amalgamation of animals, plants and people in an alchemical dance: six-legged strawberries, flying fish and people growing out of flowers, exchanging body parts with animals and plants, as if the mass of fruit, gills and snouts were one and the same substance. Elms was increasingly nodding agreement and adding his thoughts. I felt like he'd found himself in that paradise, and my monster could only look on and pant in ever growing jealousy.

The boat reached the Bank Power Station converted into Tate Modern and arrived in the narrow straits between the bank and the pumping plant. We sailed between Scylla and Charibdis, and somehow these two monsters calmed mine, devouring the remains of Odysseus' crew, as your conversation was drowned out by the screaming of hidden speakers and sudden action lit up by the beams of reflectors from port and starboard. There were shrieks and the boat shivered until the slaughter was over and we continued our voyage.

This time Eliot was speaking, and you were nodding. He asked you to record your voice describing the Garden of Earthly Delights, and he would make up a synopsis, take it to the relevant places and guarantee that you'd receive sufficient funds to go and shoot in the Prado and the Doges' Palace as well as the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Brussels and Lisbon's Museo Nacional, since all Bosch's paradises would need to be filmed. His unexpected enthusiasm for the project, regardless of whether it was genuine or not, caused you to forget about me. And I, gnawed by my monster's jaws, felt like Odysseus' sailors, who had just been devoured by Scylla and Charibdis.

From behind the bulk of HMS Belfast, near Tower Bridge, appeared Calypso's island. As we drew nearer, the phosphorescent crystal turned out to be a kind of hut with panoramic windows, rocking gently on a little barge. On a purple sofa in the red-carpeted interior was the negligéd Calypso, reclining in the weary pose of a courtesan staring at a TV screen. Only Odysseus' arrival wrenched her from her catatonic state. She embraced and kissed him. Odysseus switched off the light. Amorous sounds filtered out from the semi-darkness in front of the flickering screen.

19

The moon of our modern age, rising and setting in our homes, is the TV screen. That's what defines the day's rhythm, attracts and repels, awakens and calms. It illuminates our immobile pupils with its deadly light. It wields power over all sublunar matter. We don't live, we watch, and television lives for us. In a mobile trinity, it's everywhere and nowhere. Why move, why think, when it knows and answers for us, leads a rich existence in the company of painted blondes and gigolos, their teeth and knotted ties flawless. If Bosch were alive, he wouldn't be painting moon children, but TV children drowning in a technically perfect hell, where production funds are always available.

I sit in the monitor's moonlight, too, and watch yet again the cassettes with your lectures about Bosch. Your finger wanders through the bottomless pit of his imagination, drawing circles in the air and touching fragments of the reproductions, picking out details the way you touched the ash tree, only more sensitively. I lose myself

in the sound of your voice, which still excites me, and I don't think about your words, only about you.

You threw yourself into recording your comments on the Garden, just as you'd promised Elms, but gave up after the first tape; you had to use words too often in describing what Bosch had painted. So you decided to record your narrations on video, and entrusted me with the function of cameraman. Taking advantage of this chance to see you more often, I bought a tripod and a reflector for my camera, and set it all up in your Drury Lane flat.

We recorded more than eight hours. You spoke, showing what you were talking about, rustling the illustrations of Fraenger's book, I followed your finger into the reproduction, then once again returned to the full shot and focussed in on your face. You looked into the lens and spoke fluidly, almost hypnotically, and I slowly moved in on your lips. I quickly corrected the shot, realizing that the tape wasn't meant for my eyes. I was merely a go-between for you and Elms, and it was he who would watch your lips, freeze them with his pause button, photograph them, kiss them, and God knew what else my newly awakened monster was whispering to me.

Yes, the more time I spent with you, the more I loved you, and the thought that I wasn't worthy of you, and that that egocentric despot Elms would seduce you, kept me from sleeping. Tossing and turning in my bed, I thought out dramatic ways of tearing you away from his masculine charms, and endlessly cursed the moment when I'd thought of introducing you to him. It had reduced me to

the role of an amateur cameraman, making videos that formed a love letter from you to him.

And you described everything in them; the moon, which you often called by its Latin name of Luna, and Venus; Luna's relationship with ships and trees, and Venus' with music, shells and fountains. You spoke about Prince Pico della Mirandola, who believed the earthly paradise was the Kingdom of Venus, and his neo-platonic idea of love. You explained fountains of Life and fountains of Youth. The symbolism of birds and fish, the butterfly and the toad, the pumpkin and the wild strawberry. The golden alignment of Sun and Moon in Pisces on June 6th 1504, and the sufferings of love, using Jacob Böhme's description of them as "a bath of thorns and thistles..." Until there came a day when, looking at you through the lens, I couldn't hold back my feelings any longer and they burst out in confusion and stupidity, with me yelling at you how much I loved you, and how I couldn't stand operating the camera for somebody else, especially someone who was going to take you away from me and condemn me, once again, to the icy solarium of the computer screen.

You listened in astonishment, smiling, as if this outburst concerned someone else, and then put your finger to your lips, commanding silence. It was amazing how such a simple gesture, conveying no authority, could calm me. Then you did something I would never have expected... I thought that before my pain had overtaken me, I had switched off the camera. But I hadn't, I'd been too stirred up and had forgotten. Left standing unprotected on the tripod, it tilted slightly upwards to show only our heads, but then tilted down to concentrate on our feet. But it preserved every word.

Now I'm watching the moment where you slowly undress, staring at me. You sort your hair, and when you take your skirt off you lean forward. I hear my excited breathing. I step in front of the camera and take you by the shoulders. I lift you up and kiss you. You return the kisses; your hand roams through my hair, strokes me then abruptly pulls away.

"Undress first," you order.

I hurriedly obey.

"Stay where you are," you shake your head when I walk towards you naked, "Hold out your hand and touch the top of my head."

I do as you wish, and you reciprocate the touch. We stand immobile – you with your eyes shut, and I, electrified, observing you, not knowing whether you're doing this to make amends for my pain, soothe the monster of jealousy, or to buy me, wanting to pay me for the hours I've spent as your camera servant.

Now I pause the tape. I rewind it and watch it again. This scene excites me, although our nakedness isn't visible. Only our heads are, and even they are out of focus. I can't remember what I was thinking then. I only remember the surprise, the embarrassed reflex of wanting to step towards you, my erect, to enter you immediately, standing up.

You open your eyes, lightly repel me, and say:

"What for? After all, we're in Paradise..."

I mumble something which I don't understand, and you touch my toes with the tips of yours and point to a reproduction hanging in your flat, the motif of the triptych's left segment; Christ, clad in

pink, stands in the middle of Eden: with his left hand he touches Eve's right wrist, while his right foot touches the left foot of Adam, seated on the ground. I remember your words about the energy emanating from the body's extremities – touching was the initiation ritual of the Brothers of the Free Spirit.

You look into the lens and ask, worriedly, if the camera is on. I answer no, of course not.

“Check!” you order. “We're not showing this to anyone.”

20

And you were right; we didn't show anyone that scene. Or any other. By the time you finished looking through all the tapes and made your selection, Elms had left London. He'd gone to New York for good. But he came back for his things, and, when we met up with him in a bistro on Wigmore Street, he said he wasn't going to take the tapes because he wouldn't be able to work on the project. Especially as Harold Prince (“You know who he is? No? You must be kidding, he produced *Cabaret* and *Fiddler on the Roof*”) intended to transport the Odyssey lock, stock, barge, sails and Cyclops to Broadway, or more accurately to the waters of New York's Hudson Bay. Sirens were to sing at the feet of the Statue of Liberty, the isle of Helios was to be built on Ellis Island and the hydraulically operated monsters would be assembled on an abandoned dock on the New Jersey waterfront.

We sat nodding our heads, stunned by his titanic vision, and Elms burned and shone with enthusiasm, waved his arms and stood on

tiptoe to demonstrate the vast scale of the costumes and sets. Finally, he looked disdainfully round the bar adorned with pictures of snails and ammonites, and out at the drizzle-dampened street, and said:

“There’s nothing to find here. Here, everything is old and rotten, without energy.”

“What do you mean by ‘here’?” you asked him.

“Well, here, in England, in Europe generally. Europe’s old, her culture’s dead, and guys drive around narrow streets in little cars and are suffocated, because their lives lack dimension.”

“What dimension?” Now I drew back, feeling he was attacking me.

“The biblical one. You can’t say here ‘and man went off into the desert’ because there are no deserts, no solitude, only sandpits.”

“If you want deserts go to Africa”.

“No, Bea, there’s deserts there, but no civilization. It’s only in America the two collide. Beautifully. Head on. Have you been to America?”

“No,”

“And you?” he turned to me.

“I was at a congress in Baltimore!”

“A congress? Baltimore...? What’s that?” he waved his arms as if swatting flies. “Come to New York together, rent yourselves a car, head west, into the desert, to California... You two are together?”

He looked you in the eye as he asked, and you glanced at me, then him, then at me again. You took me by the arm and said:

“Yes.”

My legs gave way under me. I was happy. For you it was different – the collision of thoughts about the film with Elms’ babbling about

America really hit you “head on.” Elms further confided that his long-term target was to take on the glass mountain of Hollywood, then he knocked back his Irish coffee and dashed off to pack his longship for the conquest of America. We sat in silence, crushed by an American steamroller, flattened and petrified like the ammonites in the pictures.

21

Your depression lasted over a month. We saw each other a few times a week, we even started living together, but the increasing intimacy on the physical side didn't go hand in hand with the psychological. You were more and more distant, absent, plainly sick. You had bags under your eyes and had almost completely stopped talking to me. I asked what was wrong with you, but you smiled as if in your sleep and stroked my face, telling me not to ask. During a stroll on Hampstead Heath you said it was nothing, it would pass, Elms had hurt you with his attitude. Then my green-eyed monster made itself heard again.

I blurted out that your feelings were for Elms, not me, and you didn't even know it. You were hiding your feelings because he had ignored you and gone away, and you were too proud to accept that. After all, he'd made it clear that if you were free, you could go to him... And similar words of wisdom and excuses, disguised as deep psychological analysis but in fact nothing more than a show of my animal fear of losing you. But not because I loved you at that time. No. I was afraid of my own fear of loneliness.

I got hysterical, and you sat on the bench and waited until I had finished... Then you said quietly, very quietly:

"It's not just the film I'm bothered about... I wanted to leave something behind."

"I don't understand," I shrugged impatiently, "There are so many other opportunities."

"Like what?" you glared at me, "I've got no time left to look for other possibilities."

"And why's that, then?"

You fell silent. I repeated the question. Eventually you replied:

"I wanted to spare you this, but you're tiring me, the way you're acting. And yourself, I think..."

"What do you mean spare me?" I shuffled uneasily on the bench.

"My throat cancer has relapsed. They're giving me a year, no longer."

22

You were wrong, you only lived another eight months, four less, but it doesn't matter, nothing matters, or makes sense. I'm sitting in the Wigmore Street cafe frequented by doctors. I let the lens wander over the logarithmic rings of the anemones on the prints and I look out onto the street with the same disdain as Elms had. I press stop. The red light goes out. I pay. I head towards Oxford Circus.

I get on the Tube, change trains, travel on. Then I walk up the slippery lawn. I sit on the same bench where you passed a death

sentence on yourself. Most of the benches have been donated to the park in memory of those who've passed away, and have brass plaques with their names. But not this one, as if it's waiting for your name.

The summer evening has peopled the lawns and for a while I think I'm at the cemetery and the dead are rising from their graves. Next to me, on the grass, a young couple lay themselves down. Their little girl of three or so has a rainbow of ribbons pleated into her hair. She could've been our daughter. From fear of decay, of implacable chemistry, you longed to have a child too. And then, once we'd decided on this act of desperation, you changed your mind. Suddenly. Like most of your decisions. You were horrified that even if you could see the pregnancy through (and you knew that the chances were practically nil) you would only provide the baby with a body and wouldn't be able to raise, cuddle and teach it, just traumatically orphan it.

At that time you took a keen interest in the works of Richard Dawkins, the Oxford biologist who maintains that duplication of genetic material is the determinant of life. The DNA present in nearly every cell of a living organism produces a variety of constructions (which we call strawberries, butterflies or humans) only in order to continue propagating itself, evolving thanks to minor misprints in its chemical legacy. The best genes are those whose strength has enabled generations of physical survival.

There is also another inheritance. The spiritual rather than material multiplication of pieces of information. Dawkins called them

'memes'. The vast majority vanish into thin air, but some have survived for centuries, duplicating themselves by fertilizing the minds of succeeding generations. Leonardo, Shakespeare, Bach and Plato created the most potently reproductive memes. And you wanted to leave something behind as well, even to a very modest extent, through your film about the Garden of Earthly Delights. When we were preparing the tapes for Elms, you already knew about your body's death sentence, and Elms, like an American court, passed an additional death sentence on your knowledge about Bosch.

23

I stand on Marylebone Road, in front of the Planetarium, and don't even switch on the camera. The writing we saw in the alleyway at the entrance to Baker Street has disappeared. It's been painted over, and I can only film the empty space, or rewrite it myself.

You had a dream straight from the copperplate in the British Museum that the Master of Banderols had created to commemorate Emperor Maximilian I's tragically dead wife, Maria of Burgundy. The Tree of Life, gnawed at day and night by mice, sails in a boat across a peaceful and gloomy lake. Death takes aim from the bank, straight at the crown of the tree. In your dream, an enormous moon rose into the sky from the left, and as it stopped behind the tree, its oval perfectly illuminated the crown. Then you caught sight of yourself shaking on a branch like a leaf, staring into the eye sockets of Death. You expected an arrowhead, but instead Venus entered the sky from the right.

Delighted, you started singing, raising your arms, but when you lost your fear of death and wanted to get down from the tree, lights came on and a stage curtain fell. You discovered that you were stuck in the decorations inside London's Planetarium. You awoke convinced that you should go there right away to check if there were any hidden signs for you.

You took me along. After a lengthy examination of all the posters, scraps of paper and notes on the hall's notice board, we discovered that strange piece of writing, the lack of which I'm now filming: an empty space in the back alley that was once covered with the chunky letters JUST UNDERSTAND THAT PEOPLE WEEP PURE BLOOD.

I took the sentence down in my notebook. Now I look at it and wonder if I should return to the Planetarium and write it back on the wall, where it had been, so that others could read it. I'm not sure who the author was, and whether it doesn't reek of cheap poetry, all I know is that for graffiti it's unique, surprising and inspiring passers-by not just to think, but to feel. Like it made me, when your dream had led us to it. And it wouldn't matter if I didn't recreate the same chunky lettering, or that I wouldn't be the author, only an 'copyist'; all that would matter is that someone's stupid sense of cleanliness and order didn't wipe out this important string of letters, and that I'd feel proud of having 'resurrected from nothingness' something that had already evaporated and returned to that nothingness.

Just like that sentence, you had also appeared in my life, awakened me to a previously unknown existence, and then vanished. Some incomprehensible illness with an astrological name had erased you from the page of life. Except that you can't be recreated. I'll try though. And when I've recreated even the colour of your hair, I'll say: "I've resurrected you from nothingness."... No, I won't go and rewrite the graffiti at the Planetarium. The very fact that I wrote it down is its resurrection. As is my description of you.

24

A boat sailing across water represents a conscious human thought. The boat sails, and doesn't sink; but a house built on water? You couldn't understand this. You examined my container designs – they looked like houses too, only without windows, but you had a dream about a house standing on the water.

"A house, it's a house," you reflected, "safety, reliability and family, as opposed to water's movement, change and formless potential. A house is made of stone, and stone sinks in water, the fireplace is extinguished and a moment later there's no house, it's a heap of rubble, a Titanic."

"Maybe you dreamt about a wooden house," I suggested. „An ark?"

"No, stone. It was made of marble."

You were engrossed in your dreams. Keeping a notebook, pencil and dictaphone by your bedside, you tried to record your dreams as soon as you woke up. You believed they would guide you through the last year of your life.

A few days later, you dreamed of a city built on water. A gloomy one, without lights. Only the moon's handwriting on the waves. In the overwhelming silence you could hear gentle splashing against the walls, sense the presence of people. Shut away in their rooms, they didn't speak, didn't listen to the radio, didn't watch television; they just were, they breathed, occasionally someone would cough. You listened closely to their presence and to the biology moving their lungs, diaphragms and stomachs. The biology of breathing, which linked them all like a single organism shut in stone rooms floating on the water.

"Venice." Deciphering this dream wasn't too hard. "I've always wanted to see it."

"You've never been to Venice?" I looked at you suspiciously, lying on the unmade bed in your flat.

"No."

25

We didn't talk in the taxi. You looked out the window at the rain-drenched streets and I held your hand. We got out at Evangelist Road. I took you straight to my computer and asked you to switch it on and find what I'd been working on the previous day. Now you watched with suspicion as the pixels gradually built up a picture of a Venetian gondola.

"What's that supposed to mean?" you asked.

"I don't know," I replied, "It's you who understands symbols."

You were silent, absorbed in the screen, watching the gondola sketches I'd saved on the computer a few days before. I explained to you that for some time I'd been working on symmetry, and that breaking it normally represented the crossing point between the geometry of inanimate and animate matter. Where symmetry breaks, life appears; and the gondola is the only boat with an asymmetrical hull, taking into account the gondolier's weight.

At first my mind rejected the idea of asymmetry like some kind of aberration, a stain in Plato's world of harmoniously ordered, symmetrical, clean forms – however, influenced by your lecture at the National Gallery, I opened myself up to that which I'd feared. I was even considering changing the subject of my PhD, since I found an analysis of the gondola's asymmetric design a more attractive idea than the Golden Section in container vessel hulls. I also wanted to go to Venice for a few days, to take measurements of a gondola in a dock somewhere, and had already arranged to see Professor Hoxter to confirm the change in my PhD. I told you all this when you put your hand over my mouth, stopping the stream of words, and simply said:

"Let's go to Venice."