

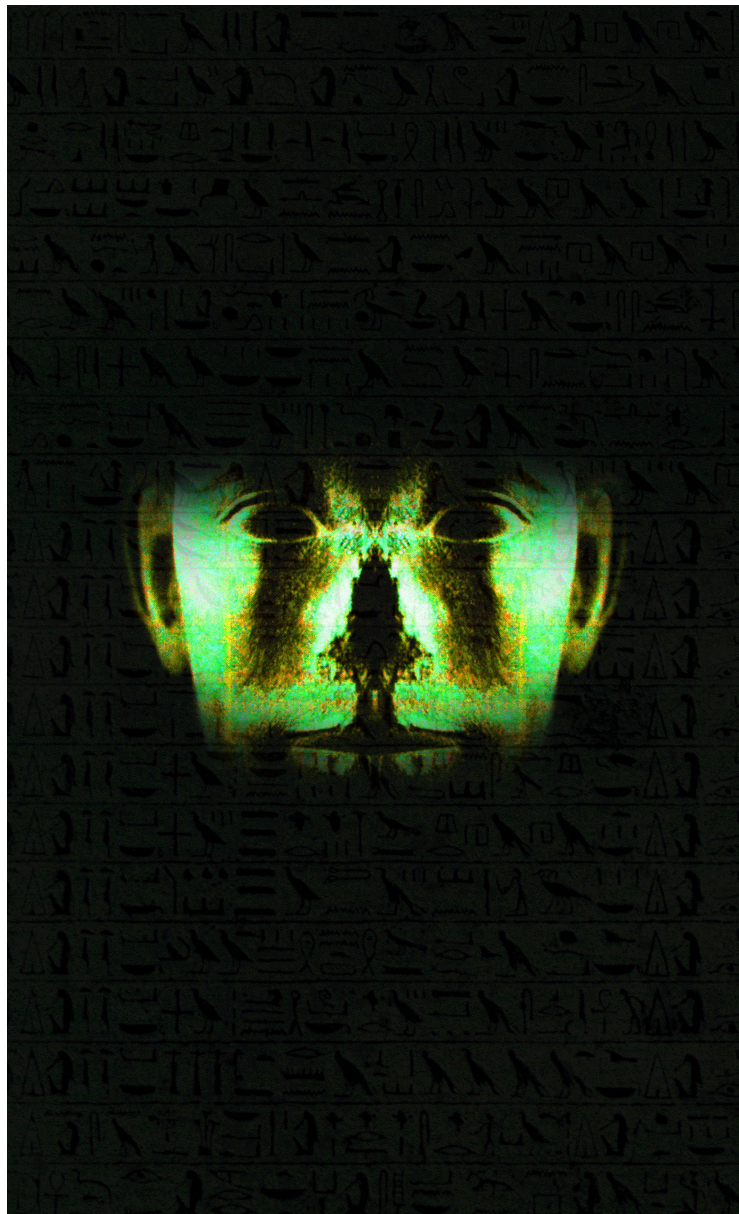
POETRY & LITERATURE

Literature

10 GHOST STORIES

A BRAZEN VOICE SHALL SPEAK

GRAHAM OVENDEN



A BRAZEN VOICE SHALL SPEAK

I have to confess I admire those past travellers, call them prototype tourists if you will, who were prepared to reach their destinations as much by their own toil as that of their hired servants. In fact many of these earlier adventurers found themselves indebted to their "drogmen" or other indigenous employees; no doubt without their company and service disaster might well have become the greater reality. In those days of seeming more distant perspectives there was actual time to develop intimacies ... precious little chance of that now commercial bulk passenger travel has virtually destroyed both *the time to stand and stare* also the privilege to do so with like minded companions. Even so, despite the excessive number of touring *groundlings* whose ears are regularly split by piped triviality, certain monuments still hold us completely. Mr William Blake was the great seer when he wrote his words *The more one enumerates the Universe the more one destroys its mystery*. Yes there is fascination and a certain intellectual rigour in knowing the evolution, the material substance of a society, on occasions this can lead to revelation, though if excessively so might equally be a destructive process. From the beginnings great art has had the ability to hold us in its thrall, we wishing to be part of it, yet inevitably left standing outside its mystery, merely the spectator, the half seeing observer. That young genius of verse John Keats made these sentiments relevant for all time in his wonderful poem *Ode on a Grecian Urn*

*Thou still unravished bride of quietness,
Thou foster child of silence and slow time,
Sylvan historian, who canst thus express
A flowery tale, more sweetly than our rhyme:*

Indeed it would be well if time were on occasions to show itself more tardy. The human animal's span is but the fragment held at the instant of life to death. Keat's words will live as long as we read and know poetry. It has to a degree defeated mortality. I suppose being an incurable romantic one can allow ones fancies too full a rein, however there are some experiences that go even beyond the fanciful, touching at the mystery of time itself.

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Back in the middle twenties there was little in the way of operational air routes in the Middle East, war would once again prove the catalyst to this particular mode of travel, as yet a decade or so would pass where feet and hooves were still the main progression. I am not aware that any of my

A FALLEN ANGEL

GRAHAM OVENDEN



A FALLEN ANGEL

St John, Farthingay Bishop is a large "estate" church now redundant. The great house that this Temple to God once served was demolished in the early thirties, the victim of a reallocation of wealth and all that entails. It was a period of downsizing, demolition and destructive conflagration that reduced many of our finest mansions to rubble, eventually their only remains lying in the memories of a fast dying generation. The church of St John had held onto a congregation up until the middle sixties but eventually reduced to three worshippers by the early seventies the Vicar, who had some five other country churches to administer, thought it was time to admit defeat and remove God's Grace to a more centrally convenient edifice. Mrs Jessy whose beginnings were as a working child of the estate, this when the great house was still in its prime, now at the age of ninety three, was much distressed by this closure and despite the considerable endeavours of the Vicar decided to take to her bed, shortly afterwards to be united with the shades of her former employers. So thus this church, a genuinely fine example of Victorian ecclesiastical architecture was left to its inner growing dust and cobwebs, the outer elements, its doors kept firmly locked and bolted. Unloved, visited solely by church agents once in every three years, its lofty spaces only occasionally whispering when a southerly gale encroached its strange harmonies to break the long silences.

I doubt if there are many finer positioned monuments in Southern England than the church of St John, for its more than considerable proportions stand well into view, particularly as its broach spire modelled on Ketton, at one hundred and eighty feet in height dominates the surrounding woodlands. The family who built this considerable church were great and wealthy brewers. Certainly they seem to have left nothing unconsidered, the result being an important survival of Victorian faith and duty. Though forlorn, half forgotten, this building was nonetheless in a remarkable state of repair, even to recent times.

Julius Henry became intimately acquainted with St John when the Redundant Church Fund required him to investigate its structural condition with a view to include it on their admirable list of protected properties. This most excellent man was both architect and surveyor of reputation whose reports were generally regarded as authoritative when given as a recommendation, for he loved his employment, inwardly weeping when a fine building proved too great a burden, even for his charity, so not to be added to their list of conservance.

As St John stands on a sweeping ridge edge surrounded by Hampshire's famous oak and beech woodlands, its spire commanding observation from all points of the compass, it visually offers no

AN AGENCY OF DEATH

GRAHAM OVENDEN



AN AGENCY OF DEATH

"I can remember one somewhat enlightened critic discussing George Elliot and referring to her shorter novel *Silas Marner* as a fairy story. She was right and I cannot think of any literary work of equal invention that can surpass it. Within its parameters it is a jewel of the first order."

Thus began my conversation with the old gentleman that was to prove the touching of the edge of anguish, though a purifying process also. You must understand that I am referring to a period over half a lifetime ago and though some of my story, by its very nature, must be conjecture it has a solid basis of fact.

James Grieves was an undoubted eccentric, but for me he was a most kindly and knowledgeable scholar of the old school. Courtesy was his second name and a desire to impart his great store of learning to any who would listen was obvious, even to the most modest of intellects. His somewhat cluttered, but to my tastes inviting flat stood in a group of rather decayed Edwardian tenements, definitely not on the right side of the municipal tracks.

I must have been, yes I'm sure it is so, his only intimate friend. I suppose similar interests in history and a delight in the likes of Kempe's search into the nature of the human soul may well have been the footings of our intellectual joining, but I liked him greatly and I believe he genuinely cared for me.

The nub of this story though lays with James Grieves immediate neighbour, a woman of too easy morals and her little daughter.

I believe James must have possessed a true soul of charity for I never once heard him talk ill of any fellow human being, though our occasional discussions on the frailty of human kind might yield sentiments "more in sorrow than in anger". In many respects his relationship with his adult neighbour followed a similar progression, for her behaviour to her little Lucy was less than desirable, even so James never overly criticized the mother.

As for little Lucy, well she was a delightful if somewhat introvert child, but her constant semi-abandonment by a neglectful mother and that woman's almost complete indifference to normal social mores soon threw Lucy together with James in an intimacy more becoming of a Grandfather and his grandchild.

NOW YOU SEE ME

GRAHAM OVENDEN



NOW YOU SEE ME

It may not always be wise to look into optical toys, the children's slide box, kaleidoscope, their more sophisticated relations such as the camera obscura, camera lucida or in particular that marvel of seventeenth century Dutch ingenuity, the cabinet of illusion and perspective. The National Gallery which faces onto London's Trafalgar Square possesses one of the finest of the latter created by Van Hoogstraten. This can only be described as a marvel of invention, also not lacking in a degree of *domestic* poetry; he is after all a master.

It is not long after our first awareness of self that as very young children we create personal phantasmagorias. The making of faces, animals, landscapes of mighty mountain ranges, all within the folding of our blankets when lying abed. This creative curiosity would seem universal, not only to children but is often kept into adulthood confirming William Blake's ...

To see a world in a grain of sand
And a Heaven in a wild flower.
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand
And eternity in an hour ...

An eternity in an hour, an eternity, eternity ...

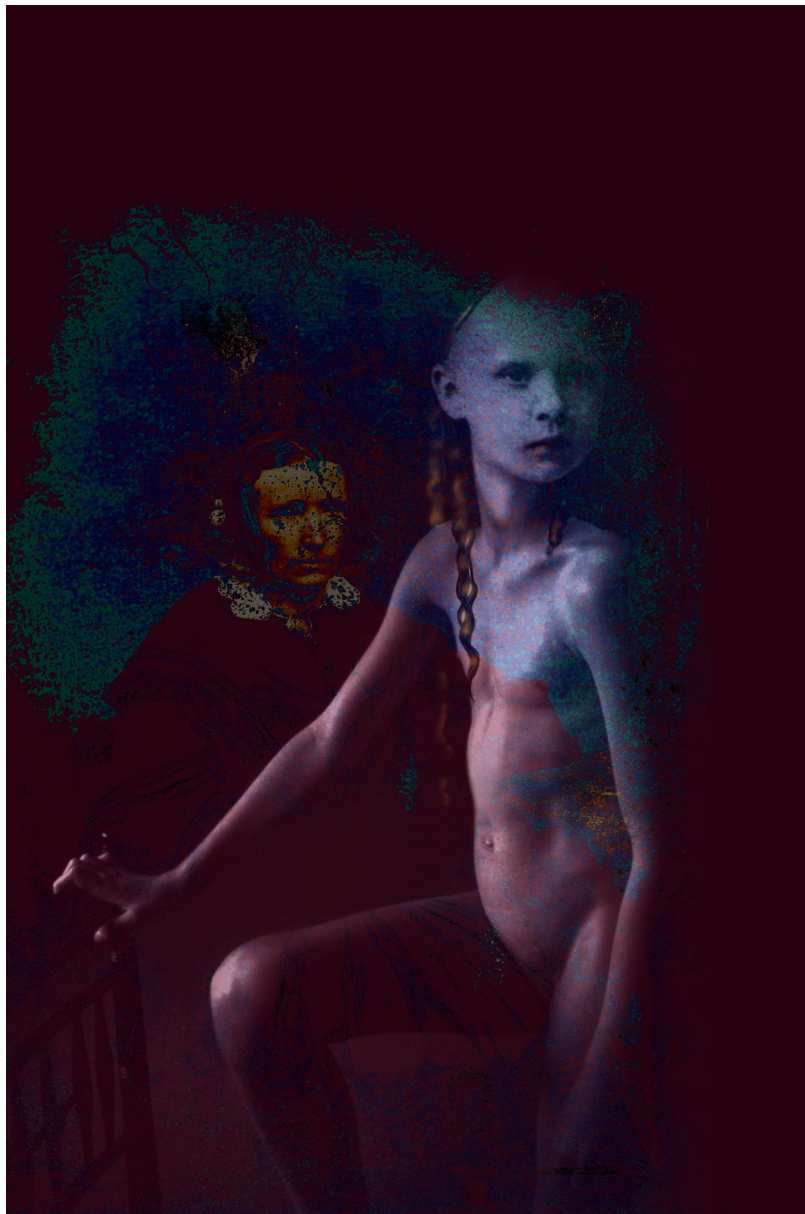
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One of the frustrations for a sole relative when his next of kin departs, leaving him a 'four bedroomed detached' filled choker block with this, that, everything imaginable ... Well where do you start? Mr and Mrs Wittaker stood on the threshold of their new inheritance with a mixture of expectation, curiosity, for Mrs Wittaker who was tidiness itself this included a growing element of quiet anger. Her husband's actions were to smooth mounting tensions by promising that he would attend to all necessities, after all there was no immediate urgency to salvage or collate what lay stacked in piles, making the entrance into each room something of a hazardous undertaking. Nonetheless despite his assurances of full control of the coming inventory Mrs Wittaker, as was her wont, rapidly showed a developing 'hump'. Not unusually the termagant in her was coming to the fore.

One might well view Mr Wittaker with some sympathy but for the fact that this ungrateful 'gentleman' was not a particularly pleasant specimen of humanity. There was very little to choose

RINGLETS

GRAHAM OVENDEN



RINGLETS

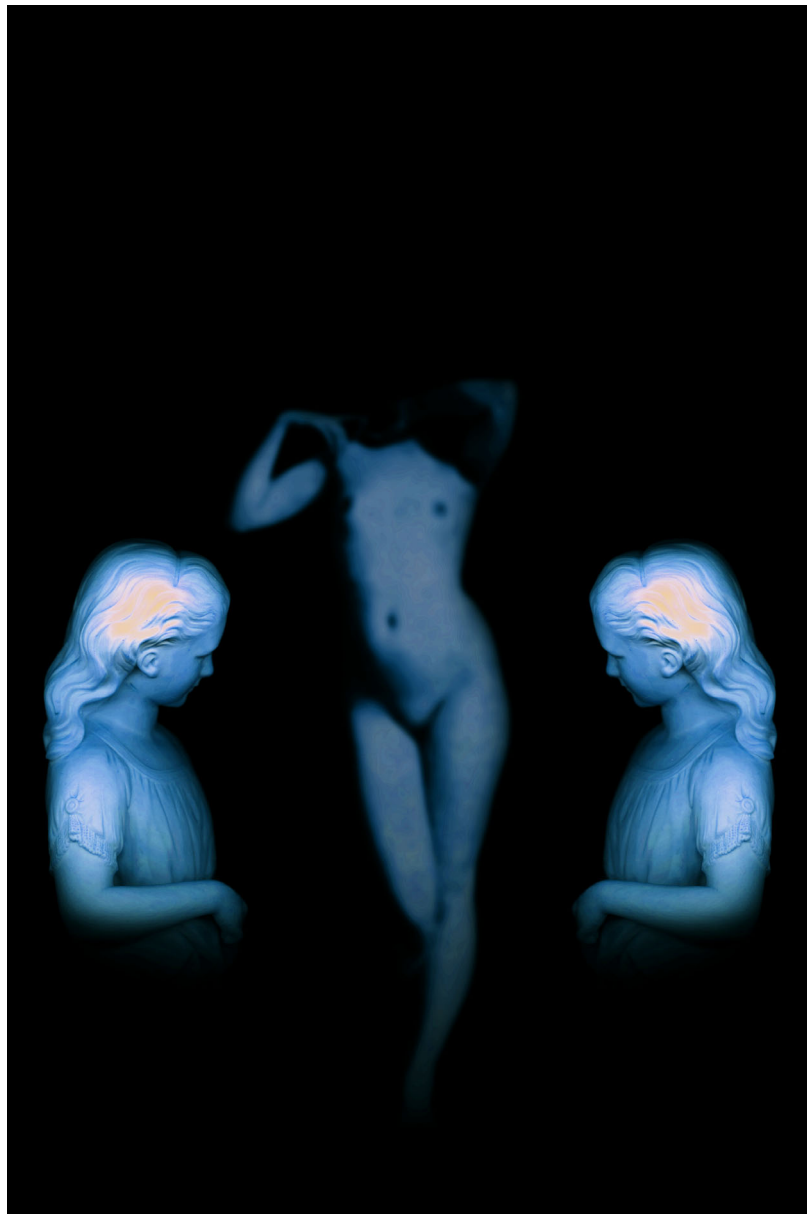
Mr Grindling glanced up from his newspaper as the bus came to its all too regular halt some twenty vehicles back from the traffic lights. Looking to the right on the opposite side of the road he noticed the now familiar door centered between identical terraces of lower shops and upper flats. Though the two very substantial wings of this building were simple brick constructions, this Gothic centre piece of fine limestone, being hardly more than a large room's width, possessed a certain distinction. At pavement level he was aware of a not untypical black painted arched door, somewhat in need of greater upkeep, while the overall design presented to the viewer, an architecture probably conceived no later than the eighteen sixties. Some foot above this seeming secretive entrance was a simple dogtooth banding coming to a pointed apex, then travelling downwards to where each "branch" terminated in the much deteriorated sculptured heads of possible "worthies," no doubt the commercial Godfathers who had financed the erection of this emporium to Mammon.

Above, this very substantial building rose to another four stories, the centre piece displaying a single Gothic window at each floor, equally decorated as the doorway though not terminating in any effigies of dead dignitaries. Once this state of the art example of Victorian "progress" must have dominated this section of what was then a new suburb of London's ever expanding greed for building land, now those outer reaches were some twenty miles further north. While still on a main route into the Great Wen's chaotic centre, both this building with its immediate neighbours gave an impression of past vitality turned to an old, enfeebled age. If one looked above the now half empty line of tawdry shops to its upper reaches, the parapet with its crumbling finials were seen to be in a severe state of decay and the tell tale budlia sprouting at many points rooted in its gutters. The upper floors also showed long unpainted window frames, their glass nearly opaque with dirt, hiding rooms untenanted for possibly generations. To Mr Grindling they were steeped in mystery, no doubt for the municipality, a white elephant that was detrimental to both pocket and taxing system.

As senior Clerk of the Court to an illustrious "seat of judgement" Mr Grindling was secure in both pocket and self esteem, though to his credit outside hours he was a scholar of mankind's passing, possessing a curiosity quite the equal of that of any child. This interest was such that it dictated his mode of transportation, preferring the upstairs deck of the traditional London bus to the more speedy if less salubrious "tenebris" of the underground. His route dropped him a mere thirty yards from his palace of work, another distinct advantage. Most of all he found this traversing of roads with their infinite variety of buildings, the continual flow of people, of constant interest to the eye. Above this

SOLD WITH ALL FAULTS

GRAHAM OVENDEN



SOLD WITH ALL FAULTS

As a child I can remember becoming obsessed by the most simple objects, even to the point of instilling in them a living presence, an animation both of creative invention and thought. Looking back now over the span of some seventy years that journey travelled with my fellow playmates was rich in individual, as collective imagination. Within each small child there was a universe of possibilities, one could encompass a star by rounding a finger and thumb thus holding it within this framing. Also in many respects this was a time that not only laid the foundations for a more structured reasoning (as the process of material evolution demands) but far more importantly opened the gates to a garden that held within it a growing fulfilment, the progress of the soul. If only one could retain that most precious sense of wonder which is the great gift of childhood. Well whatever the vicisitudes of experience we will all pass beyond the material world *Perchance to Dream*, the only needful anguish being the pain of knowing death. Fanciful you say? If you will, materialism is not and never shall be the master of my gaining. As long as Spring returns there is hope, perhaps even a little joy.

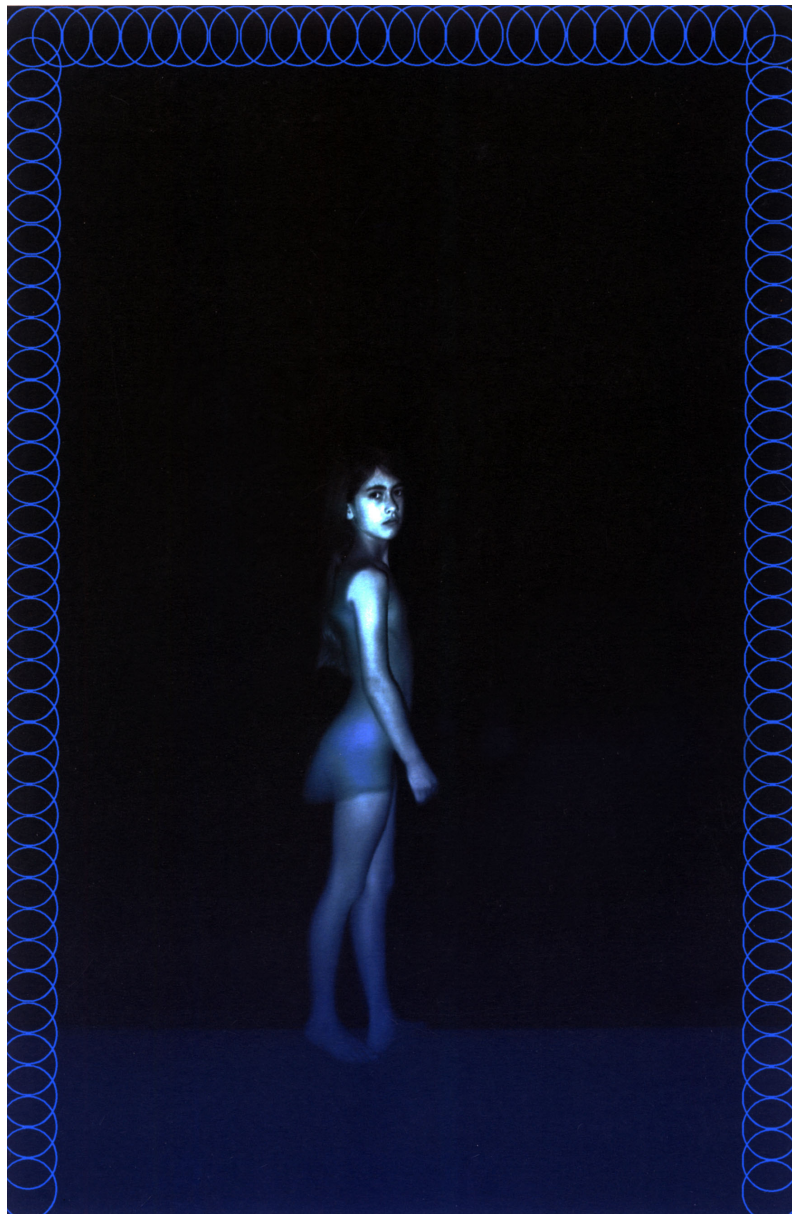
I digress, for obsession, covertness is the play of this rather sinister tale.

The auctioneer had commenced to place before an indifferent group of punters some two hundred items, most proving at best rather average objects of *little virtue*. All would be placed under the hammer; no doubt the world of collectors or any others for that matter, would hardly find themselves impoverished, even if the descending drabble of finality had shattered many of the pieces concerned. It was proving a most dreary assemblage for both buyer and seller, as such was in keeping with a chilly November day, wet and windy to boot. Having said, one Marcus Thomas Thominson was waiting in some quiet anticipation for lot ninety seven to come under the scrutiny then direction of the auctioneer. He was quite determined it would be his, having, certainly compared with any competitors present, a very long pocket, thus an almost inevitability of possession would ensue.

The coveted item was a medium sized (some twenty inches tall) figure of a veiled well proportioned nude female not dissimilar to other Parian "ladies" that already graced Mr Thominson's substantial and superior collection of statuary. This assemblage consisted of both large and small works of sculpture carved from the round, equally those created from the mould, cast in numerous

NIGHT SHADOWS

GRAHAM OVENDEN



NIGHT SHADOWS

"If you can face a little expedition then tomorrow we may well visit the old Theatrical Academy in Broughton Square. Firstly, filling this evening, I wish to recount a series of events that show genuine mystery, also that which touches on the edge of terror.

As a doctor dealing with mental aberration of one sort or another (I believe the vulgar once referred to us as alienists) I have had many bizarre experiences but none, except this occurrence, which involves the phenomena we call paranormal. As all parties concerned are no longer with us I do not feel it a moral duty to hold all to myself as a personal *cabinet secret*. I know your scholarship well enough to have faith in your integrity. Shall I proceed?"

"By all means do. May I pour you another cup of coffee as I have a feeling that your account may take us into the small hours and as Clara Schumann was known to say to over vigorous pupils, *why hurry over beautiful* or in this case deeply interesting things."

"You are very kind. Please take notes if you feel the need of their prop to memory. There are two main charecters and two ... revenants in my tale: the former as I have previously stated are no longer with us. As to the latter, I can give you no opinion on this: you must come to your own decision, mine is no doubt to be always equivocal.

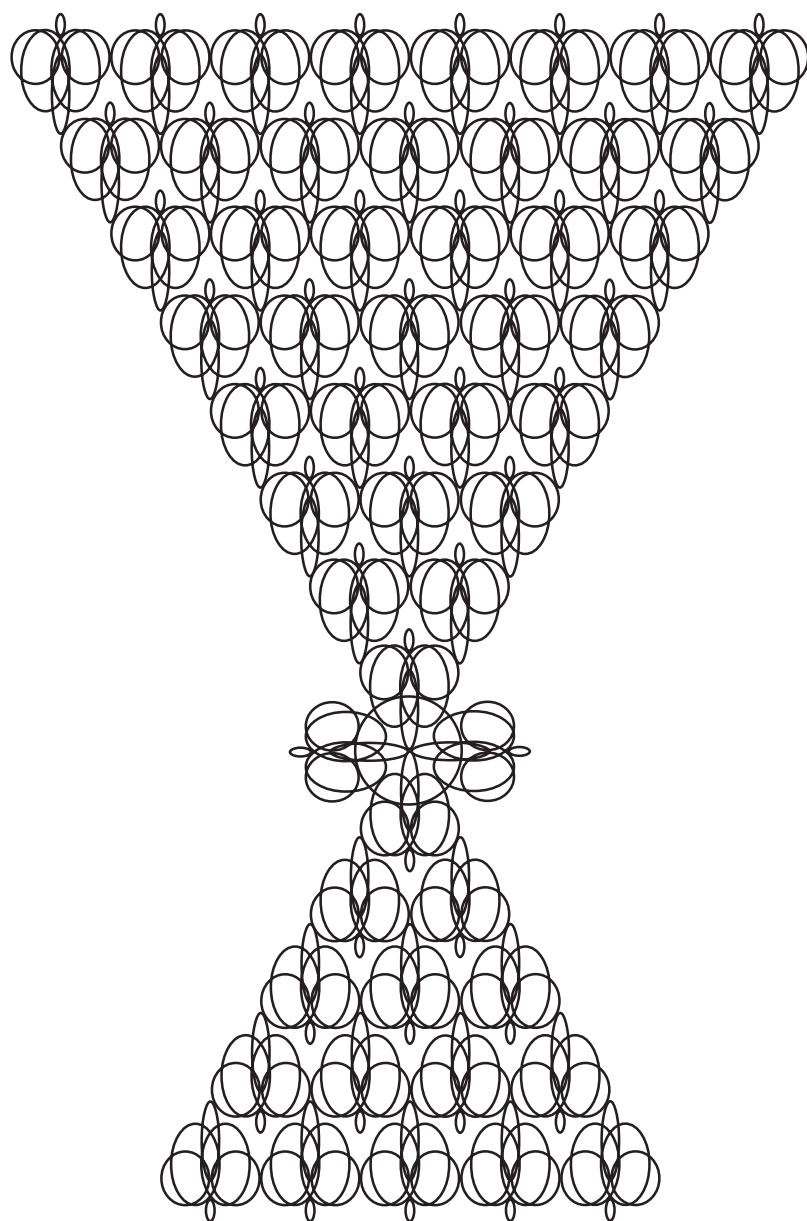
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The series of events begins with a visit to my consulting room by a Chief Inspector of Police. I am sure you will agree with me on the difficulty a man in his position might have in recounting such a singular experience as his to a total stranger, despite the reputation of sympathy, understanding that (I hope) we possess. Let me say from our first meeting I liked my client. He was gentlemanly in manner and sympathetic in temperament, that rare breed of police officer one might well trust to the most adverse conditions, to be held up as a model of strength without any element of self-seeking. But to the point, let me give you an account of the prelude to the growing darkness in his own words. My secretary transcribed a most adequate document taken from our taped interviews. As you know, though I retired some half a dozen years ago, my memory was and is still very strong. If I have a vanity it relates to this considerable gift."

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THE BUTTERFLY HUNT

GRAHAM OVENDEN



THE BUTTERFLY HUNT

If you travel West to the furthest extremity of the South Downs and having surmounted the great hill that looks over one of our most historic cities, you will find, turning back a mile or so to the East, an area of intimate valleys. Each of these lying immediately to the next, a terrain looking not dissimilar in appearance to that of a non-geometricised poaching pan. This somewhat unique hinterland possesses a decided character, somewhat secretive and an added feeling on occasions that an intrusion into its territory may not always be welcome.

The truth is this was a much quarried and mined area for both a firm building chalk stone interspersed with flint. These diggings were in all probability finished some hundred and fifty years ago so nature has had more than sufficient time to dress the scars which man in his enthusiasm for "plunder" has created.

Occasionally walkers can be encountered wending their way through these valleys, whose sides of rampant downland grasses broken here and there with hawthorn, the cowparsley edging walks, in spring a myriad of wild flowers, not least Harebells and Poppy - these proving a feast to any sensitive eye. Even so this seeming area of untarnished nature held its own darkness as I was to find so completely to my emotional cost.

As an artist I deeply loved these near' forgotten stretches of downland, whether it be in its upper walks of sun and wind or sheltered valley floors which in their early shadows engaged with a sense of mystery. I had often painted these grandly sweeping views but equally observed their close detail. I knew I possessed a more than intimate understanding of their poetry and simple beauty: perhaps, but there was as yet a deeper turning of its soil to be revealed.

I think the first incident that was herald to these happenings, had at the time made no sinister impression on me whatsoever. It was a fine, balmy, somewhat light hazy day, the sun overhead and pervading all that wholesome perfume of late Spring grasses. I had sat for perhaps two hours making a small oil sketch of a grassy slope broken on occasions by clumps of Blackthorn and Hawthorn and was content with my endeavours (at least as far as any serious artist may be). Looking up towards a broken area of ground that even after so many decades showed the evidence of past workings I noticed three figures, that of a man, a woman and child. They were perhaps some two hundred yards away: I could clearly see that the man and child both held large

BEAUTY WITHOUT MERCY

GRAHAM OVENDEN



BEAUTY WITHOUT MERCY

"I am sure you will have noticed that only ill executed art has that negativity within it that gives the appearance of the sinister, or if you will, touched with that deadening some refer to as being haunted. When quality, a certain degree of shall we say, more than competence enters into the equation, a graphic representation will take on its own life being inevitably that of a positive intercourse. When you reach the level of greatness where spirituality is presented in all its intensity we are as far removed from *umbra mortis* as is possible. Those most infinitely tender touchings seen in Rembrandt's *Bridal Couple*, his even later *Return of the Prodigal Son* radiate a truth that is absolute love itself. Who would have need of ghosts when base matter, in this instance oil paint, can create such gold, the timeless presence held in Grace."

"My friend you are most eloquent, I understand what you say but equally you must remember that I am the senior representative of a most illustrious charity that holds many important estates, not least their great houses under our administration. As to bad art, well sadly I must say and certainly in family portraiture in particular there is no shortage of this within our collected holdings. On that basis the properties concerned must be overrun with revenants, indeed hardly less so than many of our contemporary art collections which play the mask of sophistication to hide their mediocrity. In all seriousness though I think I can show you a small portrait of a *Belle Dame Sans Merci* quite exquisite within its defined limitations, that possesses a singular, also a rather sinister history. Can you visit Tenbury Lacy next Thursday week as I shall be there on estate business for at least two days. I will treat you to excellent hospitality, show you the painting concerned; also if you can stay the night I shall see if my ability as a teller of tales can do justice to, well deaths in most singular circumstances."

* * *

As Mr Greenlaw drove home, always if possible by a circuitous rout, as this combined the pleasure of country lanes with a dearth of traffic, he dwelt on his friend's offer, looking forward with anticipation to the promised visit. Being retired, as a widower time was his own and he filled it well. After the hard grind of a successful financial career he was now his own master. His past amateur interests in the arts next to his wife was his greatest pleasure, this had now become a perpetual indulgence, fortunately with an income that was more than adequate to accomodate it. Mr Greenlaw also had an eye, understanding instinctively the true quality of man's creative ability,

VIRGIN TERRITORY

GRAHAM OVENDEN



VIRGIN TERRITORY

It is fascinating to observe how children and animals will show a heightened sensibility when finding themselves within the proximity of an edifice or even a terrain whose legend is one of ill rumour. Sadly this important necessity to self preservation seems seldom to be carried forth into adulthood. No doubt if it had been, this story might well have turned into a more accommodating byroad, one whose traversing had more to offer in the way of pleasurable perambulation than an inevitable meeting with that which one would most decidedly not wish to meet.

This as it may, such concerns were far removed from the mind of John Talgarth, a young student of political history, particularly as the machinations of the vulgar as presented by his University course had been flung to the winds. He could walk forth as a free entity, at least for the period of his much anticipated holiday.

Talgarth may well presented himself for some forty odd weeks of the year as a somewhat introvert, nonetheless, studiously involved investigator of the political animal, whatever its shade might reveal, but whether this progress towards a Bachelor's Degree was close to the inner man, that is decidedly a debatable point. How singular that on occasions one of genuine intellect, possessing the sovereign right of self decision, should appear to follow an outward path that seems to contradict the very essence of its inner being. It was only on these somewhat solitary holidays that the true self became the dominant feature of existence, a release of the spirit from the thralldoms of the educational strait-jacket.

We might well wonder at the seeming lack of self analysis that encroaches with age, a stultifying of investigation into the nature of a personal divinity as opposed to the collected mediocrity of acceptance without questioning. Certainly for young Talgarth his spiritual seeking was still at a high level of curiosity, particularly when the artifice of a structured education was removed from the equation. If one were to meet him on his holiday rambles it is very likely that little of academia would show itself; a transformation had taken place. Also despite his tendency towards the introvert it must be said that if opportunity arose this student of man's political ego would prove himself a thoughtful and kindly friend to those who held to him. One such was a fellow student whose passions also included walking holidays. Eventually there would be a meeting at a heathland hamlet, then a continuation together into unknown territory. Talgarth particularly looked forward to this as there are few greater pleasures in life than that of shared enthusiasms.