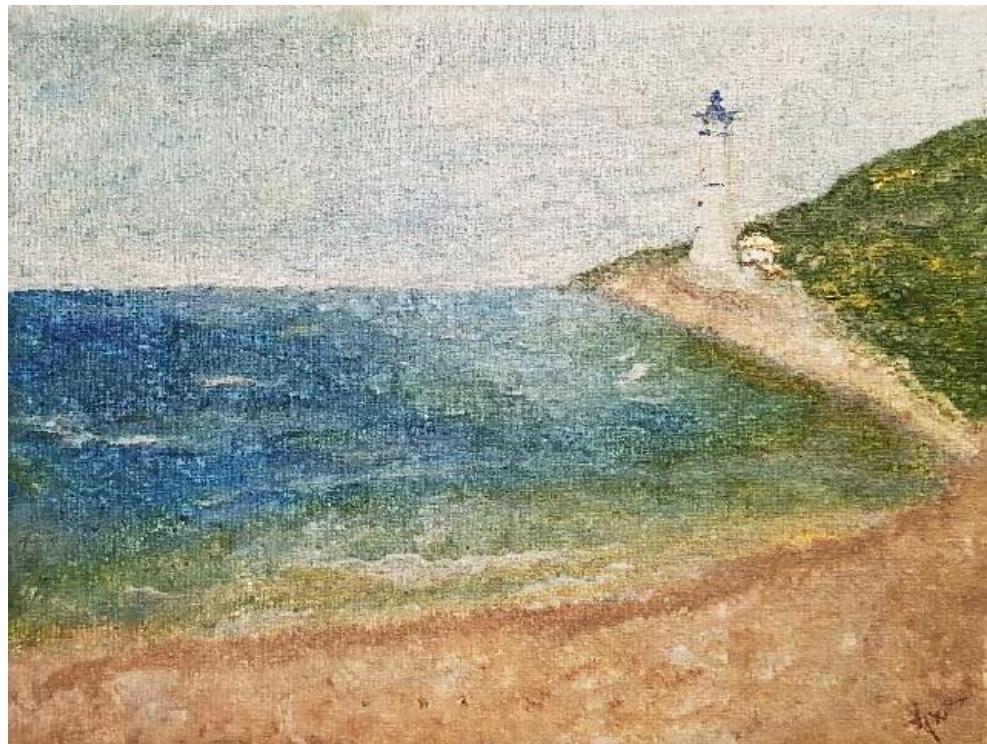


The Lighthouse

From: The Black Church, Equinox of the Madmen and Other Short Stories.

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Have I not kept this in reserve and sealed it in my vaults?

Deuteronomy, 32:34

I

There was the lighthouse and there were a few of us, gathering like night butterflies, enduring its cold and empty light – senselessly living there, because nothing from that forsaken land could have been rewarding for us.

But for inept people there has never been a bigger blessing than laziness, loneliness and the deserted land. And the silent horizon above the sea knew how to be the halo on our disowned selves. Otherwise, nobody was ever looking for us, and only winds cared about our existence, which, just like the weather patterns, were flowing endlessly, sometimes changing direction, wrapping us in gusts, gently caressing or violently whipping us, ravishing the entire land, carrying the sands of the travelling dunes.

The lighthouse was old, built on the shore, with the sole purpose of announcing ominous conditions to the sailors. The lower shore was an endless beach that slowly forged into the sea, and then sporadically let the sand dunes peek out far on the water, where nobody ever expected to see them. Around harbours, one would hear stories about past shipwrecks; in evidence, on a stone promontory a few miles away, there were crosses with faded engravings, destined to perpetuate the blurry memories of Levantines who died around those places on who knows what ancient night.

The structure was not too tall, made of brick; shattered in places, and covered with a greenish, rusting plate, and had an iron railing framing the spiralled stairs. Up there, in a glass cylinder, an acetylene-fuelled lamp was always burning, powered by tanks which were changed once every two or three months by a couple of seamen who travelled there

from the harbour about forty miles south. They were travelling in a short boat, barely visible when riding the waves, and they would bring, along with the new tanks, the usual food for the lighthouse keeper: cornmeal, salt, liquor and tobacco. They would even bring a few firearm cartridges which he'd use to hunt ducks and coots, once he was sick of fish, or, in winter, to chase down the wolves that roamed the dark reeds of the lagoons. In fact, he rarely hunted or fished. Most of the time he would sleep with eyes wide open, hands behind his head, stiff like a corpse who had no one to close his eyelids. I have no idea what happened to him at night, as I used to sleep deeply, and I'd only wake up at dawn, when again I'd find him lying on the wooden bench at the foot of the lighthouse. Sometimes I thought I'd hear, like in a dream, gunshots far away over the lagoons. I never asked him where they came from; I'm sure he wouldn't have ever told me. Maybe the guns wouldn't even fire outside my haunted dreams. That's what I used to tell myself back then, when I had barely arrived on that shore and I had no knowledge of its laws.

II

The shore had the beauty of melancholy and desolation. It was a narrow sand strip, tens of kilometers long, lagoons lining up north, beyond narrow strips of sand dunes. If you climbed up the dunes, you'd see an endless land with forests of reed behind. Water bodies dotted the landscape – wide lakes with islands of floating vegetation or rows of willows and poplars with black-hollowed trunks. Birds disappeared in the horizon, unknown, bizarre, sometimes white-feathered, sometimes fawn feathered or stained in unusual colors. Huge birds, with long necks and sword-shaped beaks, or small birds, in noisy and rapid flocks, coming apart or back together in a moving spot under the vast skies roamed by clouds in hallucinating shapes.

Their shrieks startled the silence like poisoned arrows. Shrieks that could foretell triumph or agony. I'd listen to them and feel like I understood their message, although I'd never be

able to interpret them in my own words. I'd also hear the rustle of the reeds, attempting to guess what happened in that world of occult germinations. I had heard that beyond the lagoons there are grasslands, but the way there is long and uncertain. I had heard about absurd disappearances and about people and their horses swallowed by the marsh; about thieves and shepherds gone savage in their fight with the beasts and the lagoons. Sometimes I'd hear a faint echo of a dog's bark, but the dead surroundings dismissed my illusions and I'd end up blaming it on the winds, which know how to delude and deceive.

The lagoon was not my thing. The stars unfurled, watching over its grey, yellow and green hues, scripted futile and obscure hieroglyphs before my eyes, and death in the marsh couldn't wait for me. I couldn't fathom such an ending – and dreaming about it never even made me flinch. Apollinaris the pious priest, the eremite vagabond, used to say that one's death can't be brought upon by anything foreign to your soul, but only through love and hate it will find you. The lagoon belonged to nobody. Or it belonged to the countless beings living in its sand strips, air and waters, and then it belonged to the trees and the reeds emerging and disappearing in its vast beyond. Apollinaris the priest was mumbling and cursing with barely comprehensible slurs and summoning the wrath of the gods over some dog from the lagoons. That's all the pious figure would say, and then he wouldn't finish his sentence. But his mind was troubled, and nobody, except the lighthouse keeper, would pay any attention to his words. The lighthouse keeper, upon hearing him, seemed to suddenly awake from his usual lethargy and come back to the life that had long forsaken him.

III

The sea was there for me. A moment of insanity or a strange affliction had brought me to its shore, right into that solitude, where everything seemed to dissolve into inertia. What could the sea mean to a descendant of mountain men? Nowadays I really don't know

anymore. Back then though, I was a teenager close to turning eighteen, an age of desolation and miserable dreams. I had graduated from school in a city up north, a city garbed in white, with wide streets fenced by trees, and with an obsession for bells and domes that rose above houses like mysterious heads. I think that's the place where a sort of uncertain sadness was planted in my soul forever. Just like the disregard for death, which once belonged to my elders. I was a good student at first, but later on, as the years passed, I became, and enjoyed being, lazy. I loved the books my teachers hated, and within their pages I found the first meanings of life. I was looking forward to having amazing things happen to me. I longed for something huge and momentous, without knowing exactly what that was, and often at night I would wander on the rooftops of houses, drawing complex landscapes in chalk. As an answer to all my questions, during the last winter of school, I used to hear the baffled caws of the crows in the trees that fenced the even, fog-succumbed streets.

Then, one day, the sea happened. I almost don't remember how it happened. I had an uncle from my mother's side; a man of dark character, concealed by an obscure biography. From everything we had heard about him, it seemed that many aspects of his existence were unknown and troubled, and nobody would have been able to find out details and certainties about a life spent around the world. And none of my relatives, even the distant ones, had seen him in a long time. His photo, yellowed into the family photo albums, would sometimes hint at the face of a drowned man, with features barely visible from the flickering sunbeams piercing through the crystal depths of the waters where he could have perished.

I never asked about anyone, and I've cherished his old image during times of secret exaltation, under the immense, cold star which would only unveil itself to the souls forsaken before their time. I would imagine him tall and dark. I was sure that on all harbour quays there was no other man more poised and more lecherous than he. Once, I went missing from home, following a blind beggar who would wander everywhere with his dog, and I never looked back.

I forgot the road I took and its sinuous ways. I only carry a memory of the harbour brothels and the first meeting with the sea, splashing the boats rolled on its knees. Not long after, I ran into the man whose name was all I knew – somewhere completely different than expected – and at first sight I started shaking foolishly. I found him on the deck of the pilot boat which used to go out at sea to meet the ships and guide them through the canal's dikes, increasingly threatened by sands. A short old man, a little hunched, with a cross-eyed look in ashy eyes that were crowned by a couple lines, flickering like a couple of empty orbs. He acknowledged me, measuring me up with indifference, and said that the best place for me would be the shore of the old lighthouse, a few tens of miles up north. He also told me that the lighthouse keeper was his friend and that I would be able to stay there as long as I wished, until I decided to leave. He wasn't very talkative; and I, eager with anticipation, didn't even realize when I suddenly found myself alone, in the dead of summer, sleeping in the austere room which the keeper shared with me, as he did both his fish and his cornmeal. From time to time he'd also tempt me with tobacco, as well as moonshine from the dirty bottle in which he mixed the liquor with the water sourced from a spring in the lagoons. The hardest part was to get used to his silence and the secret animosity he seemed to bear towards me. But the sea knew how to make up for everything. Besides, I didn't figure out the suspected hostility from his words or his face. It was easier for me to understand the chatter of the seagulls than his monosyllabic and senseless talk. And even the things that were about to happen to me only helped me understand half of it.

IV

- “*You boy, be aware,*” my uncle, who didn't seem very happy to see me, told me before saying goodbye. “*You have a strong body but your heart is weak-willed. And I'm really afraid the life you're looking for is not for you! Your elders were descendants of thieves and warriors, and you have a bit of outlandish blood in you. I see you. With your handsome*

looks, you're better off making whores happy. Your dad must be from up north, where people are white and fleshy. Beware so you don't become fish food or get eaten by the herons before your time!"

It was everything he's ever told me, and I can't say I liked hearing it, nor seeing the crooked grin that disfigured his face when smiling goodbye. I was left depressed and it took me a while to get back to feeling myself. Only later I realized that, from his words, a shield-like poison seeped into my soul. I realized it when, just days after arriving on that forsaken shore, I had to attend an unusual funeral.

I had woken up at dawn and, while stepping out of the keeper's room I saw him a hundred feet away from the lighthouse, which was still flashing faintly. He was sitting quietly next to an unknown dead body. The dead man was naked, turned a bluish colour, lying on his back, eyes open, sunken into greenish, cloudy water. He had no blow or bullet marks, and still, as soon as I laid my eyes on him, I was convinced someone had killed him. Who could have killed him and who was the man lying in front of us, so close to the sea that strong waves would sometimes soak his long locks and greet him with sorrowful whispers from the gleaming depths? There was no way to find out. He looked like a robust man, middle-aged, well-tanned and roughed by the seas, which were about to welcome him beneath, giving him the translucence of nothingness, forever.

There, however, such questions were pointless. The only question arising in the keeper's mind was whether the lagoon or the sea was to become the tomb of the stranger on the beach. "*Let's go,*" he said almost to himself, grabbing the corpse by its stiff legs, and I ran ahead to push the sand-anchored boat into the water. We got him in and laid him down in the boat's water-soaked belly, and grabbing the paddles we quickly travelled south, where the water was deeper.

The lighthouse looked smaller on the deserted coast; the seagulls were shrieking horrendously, more than ever, more hostile, more hideous, more primal, and the red horizon was growing and shrinking like a doomed circle. An empty feeling overwhelmed

me, as I was rowing like a madman, gazing at the sky, rigid, lost, like the undead running in fear of the sunrise catching him among the living.

Distantly, I heard the keeper's voice telling me to stop rowing. When I turned to him, he was standing at the other side of the boat, slashing a poplar branch with a short knife. In a moment, a small wooden cross on a thread hung loosely around the dead man's neck. Then we dropped him in the water, and while rowing back, the sun started rising askew, crowning our heads like we were lawless Samaritans.

V

The keeper's calm and indifference looked like a first offense to me. All day long I couldn't find peace. I went for a swim far from the shore, I slept on the sand and, in the afternoon, I took the gun he'd lend me sometimes and I shot a big yellow bird on a sandbar. The dead man's face followed me though, and in the evening, I felt my feet carry me to the remote huts on the other shore. They were made of wood, reed and clay, about a mile away from the lighthouse, on the same narrow beach between the sea and the reeds. I hadn't been there before. I knew that some fishermen from down south inhabited that place, having arrived from the villages hidden among the countless water streams in the delta. Why they had come here, I had no idea. I couldn't know, as long as I was still asking myself the same question. Maybe it was the empty beacon of the lighthouse that drew them here, maybe stupidity, or maybe the same lure of solitude and hideousness that had been my motive.

I was walking on the sea side of the beach whistling, and I was aimlessly playing with the waves which laid down on the sand, threatening to soak my canvas shoes at any time. From time to time, I'd stop and, turning towards the lighthouse, which already began flickering in the dusk, would curse out loud at the keeper for his mute ways. He only knew how to be silent, or to tell monstrous lies, as if he was mocking me. Lies to him were the shields of

silence. After I had asked a few questions, which received strange and irrational answers, I gave up trying and, slowly, we resigned ourselves to a co-habitation of few words. That's why I'd never mentioned the dead man anymore. What good would that be? I was almost positive he'd tell me the sea brought him there.

I didn't even realize when I wandered in front of the huts, a few steps away. They were black and dead like a bunch of reed mounds. Only one of them, farther away, let a gleam of murky light break through a small window, like a giant owl with one eye born from the surrounding darkness. I noticed a shadow slowly sneaking behind a hut, and right at the top of the dunes behind, a horse rider's shadow vanished in the reeds. Startled, I looked at it cautiously. Far away over the lagoons, I heard a horse's enraged neighing and a shriek which could have been human or a maybe strange bird. After a short moment of hesitation, I carried on towards the hut with the light on.

“Who are you looking for, young man?” says a sudden voice behind me, and turning, I saw the beautiful head of a middle-aged woman, glancing through an open window. She was watching me with big and somber eyes – blue or green, I couldn't tell – glimmering in the dark like two phosphorescent circles. She seemed to be naked, with her long hair loose, arms resting on the window sill, wearing a thick, brass wedding ring on the little finger of her left hand and a string of big beads around her neck. I had lost my voice and I was staring at her, trying to guess what was hiding in her dark hut. I must have uttered quite a few senseless words because the woman smiled back at me compassionately. I don't remember how she persuaded me to go in. I don't remember how I entered a room which smelled like sweet clover and algae; I don't even know when that rowdy, red night came to an end. All I remembered were her hands moulding me like a warrior's statue and a few bits of ritual obscenities, whispered in the ear during our shamelessness. The night was unwinding like a mad mill, and its hours flew by without notice. At some point, I heard the horse's neigh again. Then some unexpected things happened. Weary as I was, I thought I heard someone slowly checking the door's lock from the outside, but I wasn't able to act on it. The woman next to me was deeply asleep. I couldn't see her face, I only heard her regular breathing. I

was under the impression that everything was happening in a foggy dream. A shadow appeared in front of the open window and suddenly someone snuck inside. Before I was able to get up, I felt a dull blow to my head, as if a bag of sand fell from the ceiling. I lost consciousness, gripped by the dizzy, drowning feel.

VI

When I opened my eyes, I was somewhere by the water. I wasn't able to see anything clearly, because of the atrocious dizziness taking over me, and I felt my eyelids closing again, exhausted. I could hear the monotonous, rhythmic rustle of the waves as I began hallucinating about white horses with flaming manes. I think I remained in that state of dream-like death for a long time. Eventually I felt cold, and convulsive vomit spells tormented me, until, having settled down, I could clearly hear the sea torturing the sand I had been agonizing on. Over the waves, I could hear a persistent and lulling buzz. Like from a long journey, I was slowly getting back to myself, I was getting back to my senses, and when my eyes could finally stand the light, I looked around with the confusion of a shipwrecked sailor who wakes up in a foreign land. I was naked, bruised, and I was lying on the deserted beach, with my head towards the sea, my hair soaked in foam and gritty with sand.

Next to me, wrapped in his time-faded cassock, sat Apollinaris the priest, reading some prayers in a slurring, singing voice. He hadn't noticed I was watching him and he continued his psalm reading, vocalizing like a howling mourner from Moldavia, whose singing and crying you can never tell apart. Because of the open book he was reading from, I could only see the upper face. His glasses were tied around his ears with a rope, and he kept his left eye shut because he only had one lens. The time seemed to be right before dawn. The sky, as the background of the daft monk's head, was lighting up. The sea faded in the horizon as I was trying to look at it with eyes rolled up over my head. The cold was getting

to me and I started shivering while the priest kept on saying his prayer. As I listened, it seemed to me it was one meant for the ones who passed away. When I finally understood it was a funeral prayer, I unconsciously touched my chest to check if I had been given the wooden cross as well. This move got the priest's attention. He startled, staring at me, eyes wide open and bulging out of the sockets, his face turned white like a skull brought in by waves, and in a second he took off running along the beach, hands in the air, one of them carrying the book, the other, his birch wood cane. My eyes followed him until another wave of dizziness sank me.

VII

I woke up in a room. I had my strength back. Sitting up in the bed I had been lying in, I realized I was in my own room near the lighthouse. Naked as I was, I pulled aside the coarse blanket covering me and stood up. On the door handle hung a faded seaman's shirt and a pair of blue linen shorts. I dressed. I ate the cold cornmeal on the table with a few chargrilled mackerel and, looking out the window, I saw the sun up in the sky. My only worry was running into the lighthouse keeper, but, opening the door, I didn't see him around the lighthouse and there was nobody on the shore either. I decided a swim in the sea would invigorate me entirely.

I couldn't remember what had happened to me, and it was only after a few days that I was able to piece together the series of events. The keeper saw me with his usual indifference and, our cohabitation continued with the same mutual cold and disregarding attitude as if nothing had happened. I was at least content he wasn't asking any questions, and became quite comfortable with our monosyllabic interactions.

I didn't dare to question the sense of what happened to me that night – and I didn't look for any sort of explanation, even after I remembered everything. I went on wasting my time

on the beach, sunbathing, swimming away from the shore, reaching the sand banks afar, watching the smoke from the ships which never came close enough to be entirely seen on the horizon, or fishing for mackerel, throwing the small fish to the seagulls circling above me. I would always think about the sea life, the lonely and crazy life, about faraway coastlines where, once arrived, you would be reborn, every time a different person. A sort of absurd hatred compelled me to kick away every sign of humanity on my way, and always turn back to the starless zodiac sign under which I was born. Through me, my estranged uncle would have his revenge against the disgust the family felt towards him. I myself, felt chosen to inherit his deviousness.

After a while I started being haunted by the image of the woman from the hut and the unseen face of the nocturnal guest, the dead body thrown in the sea and the neigh of the horse from the lagoons. I had known that everything was going to come back to me and I was ready for this. I had a bone to pick with someone and I wasn't the kind of person to put this off for long. The night had shown itself to be unfavourable; I was going to try my luck during the day.

VIII

One morning, I got going again. The seagulls chronicled my journey with their shrieks. I didn't even know the direction I was supposed to follow, and only after I got far from the lighthouse I saw the huts on the shore, worn out by the sun, basking in the desert of sand and reeds invading ominously from the north side. When I arrived in front of them, I noticed a group of women with tucked up skirts by the sea, washing fish that were about to be salted and hung to dry on the yellow-greyish roofs. They hadn't noticed me so, going around them, I took the direct route across the sand towards the huts, trying my best to identify the one where I had spent a night that could have also been my last in this lifetime. I stopped behind one of the huts, I looked back at the women again, observing them

carefully, but the only one I was looking for was not among them. Although I had only seen her in the dark, I was sure I could have recognized her. But, decidedly, she wasn't among them. Otherwise, all of them were incredibly ugly, deform, aged, ravished by oblivion and the stupid misery of a senseless life – and as they were all standing in the water together, they looked like the ruins of an old, primitive bridge, mocked by waves and steadily buried in sand.

I turned my back on them, and, disgusted by their sight, I went on investigating the huts, carrying a stick to defend myself from the wild and dirty children following me, quietly, with dumb looks in their eyes. The huts looked so much alike that I realized I'd never be able to tell apart the one I came here looking for. I was standing there, hopeless, when I heard a voice behind me: "*Who are you looking for, young man?*" Startled, I turned swiftly. For a moment, I thought I recognized the hut, and the voice, and the open window. Everything flashed through my head, when, glancing in the direction I heard the voice from, I felt like things suddenly took a totally different turn. Behind the open window there was a woman in her mid-fifties, her face disfigured by chickenpox, thin, gaunt, hideous, and looking at me with blurred, almost colourless eyes. On her head, hidden in the clump of hoary hair, there was a small black bird, plucking the presumed myriad of lice with its sharp beak.

A nervous shiver shook me, and I'd have jumped to strangle her if it wasn't for my horror. I could barely find the strength to utter a curse word and, humiliated by my memories, becoming more and more muddled, I turned around walking towards the lighthouse. I was walking with my head down, my mouth felt burnt, my ears were ringing, and my temples ached, like after a three-day drunken spree. The sun was up, scorching the sand, which burned my feet. The day seemed even more unfavourable than the night.

IX

Times of lethargy and apathy followed. The hideousness followed me everywhere like a shadow and an unarticulated worry kept weighing down on me, giving the impression of an invisible but unyielding cage, where a malignant force locked me without my knowing. A door which I couldn't fight had closed in front of me and I was feeling more and more lost, more incapable.

For the first time I felt the need to get closer to the lighthouse keeper, which seemed to not disinterest him completely, although he kept on staying silent or speaking the same meaningless words. One night we got drunk together and lay down on the sand, blessed by the shadow of Apollinaris the pious priest, drunk as well and surrendered to a magnificent delirium. I had never told anyone anything about what had happened to me; I thought that out of all of them, I was the only one that didn't know anything about the true life of that desolated land ruled by the vain light of the old lighthouse. The more I was trying to forget everything myself, the more tyrannical were the questions that haunted me.

That's when I got the idea to try and find out how and where the keeper would spend his lunatic nights – and one day, upon waking up in the middle of the night, I followed in his tracks, as he took his gun and walked towards the lagoon. I kept a considerable distance to avoid been seen, and from time to time I'd lag behind while lying down on the sand, until he disappeared in the reeds. I picked up the pace and, as I couldn't see him anymore, listened to the low rustle of the reeds, doing my best to not lose his track, otherwise I wouldn't have been able to find my way around the water stretches and the swamps, which only he knew how to avoid.

I managed to follow him closely for a good part, then I couldn't hear him anymore. The breeze picked up, and the reeds, dried out by the wind and the sun, swayed their wings with a dry, harsh sound, like the grate of toothless gums. The soft rustle of his steps disappeared in a wave of frail howls and whispered wails or curses, and worry shuddered me, alone as

I was in the dead of night, lost in that endless and sinister wasteland. I kept going hesitantly. I would let myself be guided by chance and the instinct I allegedly had.

The darkness grew deeper once the moon disappeared behind a cloud, and, as the wind picked up, it seemed like I was being followed by an indistinct presence, and my imagination gave way to all the horrors a confused teenage mind could muster. I soon realized I had lost the keeper's tracks and that I was following only my own futile stubbornness. I couldn't see anything. I could only hear the hushed clamour of the reeds in the wind, monotonous, incessant, bursting with obscure suggestions. Two large birds startled right beside me, and as they fled, I decided to turn back.

Only now did I become aware of all the hurdles I had not anticipated before I left. The path – if any – vanished, hidden in the reeds, and with every step I had to stop and check for the firmness of the ground. I couldn't tell the direction anymore and was fearful that I might be unknowingly going the opposite way, travelling deeper into the lagoons, where my fate would be as a corpse to feed fattened snakes and red shelducks.

Then, a few gunshots fired. I immediately remembered the shots I heard nightly in my sleep. I set off in the direction I thought they were coming from. Suddenly invigorated, I forgot about any danger and started running through the reeds as they scratched my legs, my arms, and my face. In my haste, I charged into a black mass and fell to the ground. When I stood, brushing sand and dried grass from my hair, I noticed that I had stumbled upon a fallen horse. Swamped in a pool of blood, it was agonizing in terrible pain, twitching as its eyes slowly dimmed, black mirrors which glimmered bizarrely and in which I saw the image of my ungroomed head, with aura of the untimely noose eternally swinging above it.

All around – nothing. No trace in sight. It looked like nobody had passed through that place. The night wrapped into the wind, and under the few stars peering through the clouds, I was alone with the horse, lost into the gloomy sea of reeds. Pain made the animal twitch and quiver more strongly, and its eyes drove me insane. I don't know why I thought that

was the only living being that I couldn't have befriended, if we had met sometime, within the bareness of that land, and that's why his agony caused me an excruciating pain. I would have killed ten people for that horse that turned up in my way and doomed me to watch its death. I didn't leave until he started going cold. I don't know how long it had been. The sky looked twisted and the wind wouldn't cease. The moon had fallen off the vault into who knows what swamp. I kept wandering about and, when I made it back to the lighthouse, having stopped far away from it so that I wouldn't run into the keeper, I saw him on the shore, near the sea, standing still and watching the horizon, where the wavering dawn was rising. Slipping towards my room where I was supposed to get a few hours' sleep, I glanced resentfully at the old tower, where the fading lights blended into the light of dawn.

X

The wind blowing in the lagoons was not, like I had previously thought, just a nocturnal breeze. The last quarter of the moon brought in the spectre of a storm that grew stronger and stronger. The night after that, I was not able to swim, as usual, far away from the shore, following the golden trace of the moon on the water. The sky got dark – one could barely see the scattered stars fading behind heavy clouds. And the waves grew menacingly, invading the narrow beach and breaking loudly on the sand.

In a few hours, the sea was so restless that the waves reached the lighthouse wall, and around it you could hear the shrieks of seagulls caught in the exhilaration and the hysteria of the storm. White ghosts in the air, poisoned arrows, foretelling disasters, appearing and disappearing in the pitch dark; those birds had some of the ugliness and the desolation of the wastelands, which started to cast upon me the familiar qualities of its fauna.

I didn't feel like going to bed during such weather. I was walking around the lighthouse, watching its light, which appeared more intense, with shades of green and blue, when I saw Apollinaris the priest, like a huge black bat, slip out of the room near the lighthouse, and, with his cassock blowing in the wind, walk towards the fishermen's huts. A hollow and cold light, cursed like the eye of hell, cursed just like me and like all the bastards destined to live around it forever. In the late hours, I walked towards the place where I usually fished. I lied down on a dune, listening keenly.

The deafened howl kept growing. People, screams, lost civilizations, wise men travelling on the windy dunes, fish, generations of antediluvian monsters, ruins of citadels devouring each other in the dark – these are the chimeras keeping me and my solitude company at night. When I stood up, gazing far on the water, I thought I saw a light playing in the waves on the submerged horizon, sometimes brighter, sometimes pale, and almost dim. The more I looked, the clearer the light burning in the horizon was. But I didn't linger to watch it for too long, because a terrible torpor took over me and I fell asleep on the sand, closing my eyes as the last star succumbed to the dawn.

XI

By morning the storm had eased. The clearing sky was about to see the sunrise, when I was awakened by ants. I was covered in big, black ants which were emerging from the sand. Numb by sleep, I rolled over a few times, and brushing myself off I managed to get rid of them. The sea was still agitated. A few hundred feet away, I noticed a group of people. The only one I recognized was the lighthouse keeper. The others were a woman and two men wearing black shirts, each of them carrying a tie in their hand. *Where the hell did they come from?* I asked myself, when I noticed a flipped boat not too far away. I struggled to understand how they had managed to come here on such a modest boat, fighting the horrid storm that had haunted that place – and the more I watched the waves,

still strong, the more I found their presence very strange. They were talking in somewhat raised voices, and not long after, they continued towards the lighthouse. A woman a head taller than the others dominated the group, now a silhouette projected on the carmine sky.

I didn't like the presence of those strangers and felt a sort of aversion towards them, although I didn't know who they were or where they were coming from, not even what they were doing here on the desolated shore I chose as my homeland. As far as I was concerned, they could have lost their rotting bodies in the deep sea undergrowth, instead of showing up unannounced in that place, where more people were the last thing we needed.

I lingered there for a while, until the sun rose, impassive as always, and then I walked towards the lighthouse. On my way, I ran into the keeper. He had gone fishing and told me that in our room near the lighthouse there were sleeping three shipwreck survivors whose boat had been sunken by the storm, a little yacht stuck on the sand banks far at sea. He also told me they were rich Levantines. He didn't give me any other information. I didn't need any more. My experience there taught me to never trust peoples' words; rather to try and understand what they are not saying out loud.

I reached the lighthouse. I grabbed the rifle hanging above the door and off I went to the lagoons, planning on catching coots and herons. However, the luck of the hunter was not on my side. After hours of wandering, I only found the horse I had once seen dying. He had been mauled by wolves and birds and now was nothing but a white skeleton, which, as I approached, set off a bunch of big rats from behind the ribs, dashing out to hide in the bog reeds.

XII

My gut feeling proved right. The people thrown by the storm on our shore the night before were nothing but a bunch of disgusting hyenas, displaced to lick the dirt of an atemporal Levantine. They were the kind of people whose life from birth to death was a vicious spiral, a perpetual move, but stagnating in its apparent growth, a symbol of agony and descent.

I felt this as soon as I got a closer look at them when I returned from the lagoons that afternoon and found them sitting in the shade of the lighthouse. They were playing cards with the keeper and speaking Greek. Only the men played. The woman sat aside, eyes gazing at the sea, watching the black shapes of the dolphins in the horizon. The waves calmed down, the water regained its usual turquoise shade, the birds circled in the air, always farther, always higher and dazed by the sun.

When I approached, they pretended to not pay any attention to me, although I was sure the keeper told them about me. I hung the rifle in its place and I started to watch them quietly, while pacing around. The men seemed to be in their early fifties, and the woman in her forties. They looked so much alike that they resembled two old twins, with faces creased and hardened by the sun, with prying eyes and downward lips, like Hellenic masks left to rot by the mouth of the Nile. I got sickened just watching their faces, so I turned my attention to the woman. Tall, robust, with long black hair, she brought to mind a feminine Hercules. Only the eyes – a piercing bright green, crusted into the olive cheeks with rough features – looked like the lights shining in a tower of a desolated and ancient citadel. Just for one second our eyes met, and I got an uneasy, empty feeling.

I didn't hang out with them for too long and I walked away, vanishing after a turn of the narrow beach. I got undressed, I went into the water and, after swimming for a bit, lay down on the sand, hidden among the few willow bushes growing around. When I looked towards the sea again, I jolted: the woman was emerging naked from between the waves,

with her hair wet, the water dripping down her statuesque body, and she was walking towards the bushes where I was hiding, having no idea I was there.

I remained still, watching her getting closer, and a silly fear got over me. Blood rushed to my face, my head started burning, and my heart was pounding. Seeing her get so close. I jumped and ran towards the sea, followed by her scream and then her laughter. I was running without looking back and for a long time I kept hearing the laughter which slowly turned into a lugubrious cackle.

The sea welcomed me tenderly as always. I swam with the despair of a drowning man and once I calmed down, after a long distance, I looked back towards the shore, and I didn't see her anymore. That's when I woke up, overwhelmed by blackened remorse. Walking back to the lighthouse, I went around the group of three, who kept playing cards, grabbed my things from my room and went fishing again. The night was black, and the sea had smooth curves, which reminded me of the immense breasts of that woman.

XIII

Since the Levantines arrived, I hadn't been sleeping in the room near the lighthouse. The summer was scorching, and the sand would stay hot until late. I'd sleep on the beach behind willow bushes and I'd dream about stars with golden peacock tails. What those dreams meant, nobody could tell me. The shrieking of the seagulls told of my unknown fate, which had been lain out for me by some drunken fairy-godmothers at my baptism.

I had gotten used to the ants and the night wind, which talks and torments the souls of the ones it calls. I will never feel as good as back then, spoiled by winds and spirits. May the memories of those moonless nights be clear forever and may the dew cry on the sand at dawn and may it be a tear for my now and forever nostalgia for that place, that land where the curse is a blessing and divine grace.

During the day I'd only exchange a few words with the keeper, who had become good friends with the two men, keeping them company almost all the time. I had found out they were set to leave when the boat arrived from the harbour to change the gas tanks of the lighthouse. It was their only chance; but that was still a few days away.

Apollinaris the priest had totally vanished. I kept telling myself he must have left on his boat to the other place of his, in the village where I heard he used to live. I hadn't seen the woman anywhere either, but one morning I saw her far away, coming from the fishermen's huts. And I left quickly so that I wouldn't run into her, without knowing how useless this attempt was.

The next night, shortly after falling asleep. I woke up like from a weird drunken stupor. After a moment, coming to my senses, I felt the craziest caresses that I have ever felt, and I saw the woman with her head in my lap. Like two inarticulate animals, we tossed in the sand and little did it take her to not strangle me in her grips. She was surrendered to a burning hysteria, and she didn't look like any woman I knew. For her, sex was like a strange emblem or like a starfish meant to sit on the sleepwalkers' forehead. That's what an unknown face would whisper to me in my sleep, and these are the images I woke up to, alone, a few feet away from the bushes where I'd usually sleep. Down near the water, I saw two oval shapes drawn in the sand, being washed away by waves with their salamander-like tongues.

XIV

Night after night, the same deliriums.

My life had changed. The days were greyer and dense. The sun set wholly, going down in the sea on golden stairs, and I was bowing like a heretic to every dying ray of light. And I was waiting for the dark. I was waiting for that hour when the moon and its shadow

mirrored on the waves crowning our embraces. I would see her body coming out of darkness, moving as though from a fairy-tale, and I felt like I was disappearing with her, waning into a lost world, that no ruin can perpetuate the memory of...

Until, one night she didn't show up anymore. I waited until late, wandering on the shore and climbing a dune. I looked around, but all I saw was the lighthouse shining its light on the wasteland, where the sea, the sand and the lagoons dissolved their contours into the darkness.

Then I understood she would never come back as usual, and a damned feeling told me I would never see her again. Back to my nest, hands under my head, I counted the stars watching over my insomnia. A few times I thought I saw her tall figure walking on the waves, coming towards me with her hair wavering in the wind, her eyes flickering in the dark. And it didn't feel good. I remembered an old belief, that the one walking on the waters brings death. But I wasn't dreaming. Or maybe I was dreaming without realizing. Maybe I was dreaming because of loneliness and yearning; even without sleeping, without closing my eyes, I was dreaming, because of too much ardor and too many stars.

Only later, after midnight, I fell asleep. That's when, far way, I heard a few gunshots again. More shots than before and farther away; who knows where in the lagoons?...

XV

The milky light was seeping through the clouds, the calm sea under the vast, empty sky had a peculiar, strange and gloomy lustre. A boat approached from afar, barely showing in those waters, slowly moving ahead like a fly on a giant dirty mirror. I was sitting on the boulders at the foot of the lighthouse, holding my head in my hands, looking into the emptiness, thoughtlessly inhaling from the cigarette which I rolled as thick as my finger, from all the tobacco I had left in my drawer.

There was no one at the lighthouse. When I came back that morning, the room's door was closed, and everything was left unattended, everything looked forsaken. The lighthouse was still lit and flickered almost unnoticed in the dull light of the sunless day. Where did everyone go, all of a sudden? I wasn't able to find any answer to my question and moreover I couldn't imagine what had happened to the woman I waited for in vain.

The boat on the water was getting closer. I was able to notice three people, two of them paddling in slow motion, and the third sitting in the back, hunched over the edge, as if he was watching the water, looking for something in its translucence. It wasn't hard to eventually figure out who that was, it was the lighthouse keeper. I assumed the other two were his Levantine friends, and, standing up, I walked in their direction. Maybe they were surprised to see me walking towards them, after I had avoided them for days and lived like a savage. But they didn't show any surprise and didn't even acknowledge my presence. The only one to say something to me was the keeper. From him, I found out they had left out at sea early that morning to take the dead woman to her forever place. Who died and how, he didn't mention.

After pulling the boat on the sand, he approached me again and told me about the hunt they went on with a few fishermen the night before, far away in the heart of the lagoon. I hadn't heard the shots? I did? That's where the poor woman died. They found her devoured by the wolves they were chasing. I must have crassly grinned while listening, because he left embarrassed, rushing to catch up with the Levantines that had gone on ahead.

XIV

The dreary weather was my only solace. No wind gust, no sun, and no wave on the dull stretch of the sea, with no birds and no wings, the day passed hazily, hollow, dragging me into its faded void. Since I had arrived here, absurd experiences seemed to happen

continuously, marking my existence with bizarre signs. What was next? And who were those people, the lowlifes gathering at the old lighthouse? Once we found each other in the same place, my only concern was being worthy of their nefariousness.

I hadn't believed a thing from what the keeper told me about the hunt and the wolves, the gaunt faces of the two Levantines and the tension in his eyes made me believe there was another kind of hunt they went on, and all the events – even the shipwreck, even the nights with the unexpectedly vanished woman – haven't been anything but means of bewilderment, dust in the eyes of the one who was not supposed to see anything. I was witnessing a silent battle, a confrontation in the dark under the invisible guidance of mysteries which continued to be inaccessible to me. What troubled me was the fact that I hadn't been yet able to find my place in this battle, despite all my attempts.

The atmosphere, lethargic until recently, started precipitating, and there were signs of unavoidable bursts of violence. I knew the ones on the shore, or at least I saw them every day, even though sometimes they appeared like mysterious ghosts, conforming to the ritual of their own customs. The land of the reeds continued to be unknown to me. I only knew the word of the lunatic priest, who, in his delirious curses sometimes mentioned the dog from the lagoon. And lately, I had been thinking of his words, which until then and even afterwards no one ever brought up.

The summer started to fade. The last days of August had the bitter smell of the sunburnt grasses, the sun burning relentlessly, more inert in the lead hazy skies, and at night, the dark-circled eye of the moon staring into the void. Before September, the whole land was numb with heat and everything kept perishing into an unusual silence. Even the wind gusts blew with obscure, sick and feverish wings.

XVII

With the change of month, the wind changed too and started blowing from around the lagoons. An insinuating wind, which made the dry bushes rustle persistently and frightened the flocks in the air, overcome by a vague unease. An unease I felt myself when I thought about everything that had happened and I saw how the green shades of the lagoons turned into ash grey all over and far away, where the horizon closed over the lifeless wastelands. But the wind, as usual, gave me a strange euphoria, a drunkenness of solitude, a sort of madness that exalts and makes you sleep with eyes wide open. All the sounds of the daytime were close and dear to me at night, because the murmur, the rustle, the breath, were carrying echoes from an unseen and fabulous world, where my years were flying to, like a flock of eighteen birds without a destination.

I came back to sleep in the room near the lighthouse, as the Levantines had moved somewhere in the fishermen's huts and for a few days I hadn't seen them. The keeper was spending most of his time around them, and I was alone at the lighthouse, carrying the pale halo of the new season. I started living his life, wandering on the shore until late at night, haunted by an insomnia I only became aware of at dawn, when I would fall asleep on the wooden bench near the old desolate tower.

I felt as if my eyes were constantly growing, opening like hollow circles, looking for a diaphanous prey hovering about me, or absorbing the night, inhaling it with useless greed.

I felt like a prophet and a magus with starry eyes, hopeless, ageless, probably the way the lighthouse felt, exiled on a lost shore between a time that was supposed to be long gone and a time that would never come.

At the end of a white night, when I was about to lie down on the bench at the foot of the lighthouse, I saw the sky light up with a huge flame, on the side where the fishermen lived. The fire started suddenly, and the wind blowing from the lagoons bent its flames, carrying

them towards the sea like blazing waves, melting into the light of dawn. I watched them like this for a while. Then an inexplicable carelessness defeated me. I was confident that those huts would burn to the ground, as they were built and covered with reeds. That they would burn the same way with or without the useless eyewitness I could have been, the same way I myself could have perished without a witness the night when I tried to find out what I wasn't supposed to know.

The fire had started from the lagoons, from the dunes where I saw the shadow of the horse rider behind the reeds. And before falling asleep, I thought I heard a sharp neigh, triumphant and wild.

XVIII

From the dunes I climbed the next day, not far from the fishermen's damaged settlement, I saw the last remains of the huts still burning slowly. On the side, by the sea, men, women and children gathered, watching with long faces, with a dumb and terrified look in the eyes. They were standing there watching how their frail dwellings disappeared, swallowed by flames, and, from time to time, in their silence, they'd raise their hands towards the sky. On the sand, there was an old woman lying down, disfigured by burns, with a swollen face; monstrous, disgusting. I couldn't tell if she was dead or not, although in her stillness she seemed to have passed away.

A man unfolded and stretched out the dirty sail of the boat by the shore, and the wind started blowing it out. Two other men lifted the old woman and, stepping towards the water, they threw her in the boat. The man got in by the mast and, sitting with his back to the shore, set sail. The wind blowing from the lagoon quickly carried the boat out far, gently hopping over the white edges of the waves.

None of the people on the beach looked away from the flame which continued burning faintly, with red hues. I watched the boat going away, and suddenly I saw how the old woman sat up halfway trying to hold her body up, fell again, then attempted once again to sit, fighting life rather than death. But the man in the boat hadn't noticed her. Leaning against the mast, arms crossed, he looked straight ahead, out far, while the boat kept gliding faster, until it disappeared in the horizon.

Only then I noticed that the Levantines had disappeared. Instinctively I looked back towards the lighthouse, but I only noticed the figure of the keeper around.

Then, two women stood up in the sand, and walked towards the fire. They took big steps, swinging their abnormally short arms. Once arrived at the fuming piles, they first took a handful of ash, and used it to rub on their faces, then, grabbing a hot ember each, walked towards the end of the dunes and threw it in the reeds.

A violent flame blazed and swelled on all sides, devouring the dry reeds and spreading deeper into the bushes. I saw varied flocks of birds fleeing in the air, screaming, bustling in their flight, circling the sky furrowed by grey clouds. The wind carried a wave of heat with the smell of ash and burnt grass. The air trembled, creating the illusions of ghostly wings. The smoke dispersed and veiled above the white flames, which galloped with their scattered manes, farther away into the yellow realm of the lagoon.

XIX

In the afternoon, the winds picked up and switched direction. They brought tall waves, rolling them on the sands, and tamed the fires quickly. Soon, a burnt stretch of land opened up, and the flames were barely showing somewhere far away, reaping the reeds or taking over the old willow trees, which now looked like solemn pyres raised for some unknown heretics.

The birds blackened the sky. It was mad. They'd circle the horizon like ash whirlwinds carried by the gale which blew them away, and from their blackness it looked like the night descended, while the sun went down in the sea, hidden behind sumptuous drapes.

The fishermen were getting ready to leave. They loaded in their women, children and their fishing nets, and all of them looked drunk, darkened, and hazy. The sails opened up, and the boats cut through the waves, heading south-west. There was nothing left of the settlement they had tried to build but ash blown away by gusts of wind swirling like a dance of nothingness. And while the sunset-coloured sails were moving farther away, just like the flames rushing towards the heart of the reeds, on the empty beach, invaded by darkness, there was only me and the lighthouse keeper.

I had the feeling that everything was to blame on the cold and festering light from the tower with cracked masonry, lighting up the emptiness of the lands and the waters, under the distant sky with vile, faded stars. I saw a world of void and of irradiated death in its petrified Polyphemus eye, and, like in a negative, I saw a strip of darkness projected into the diaphanous light of day.

But in a moment, all things appeared more beautiful than ever, and my soul was overcome with calm joy. Maybe that joy came from the sea. Maybe from the wind. Most likely the wind, from beneath its hummingbird and eagle wings, from beneath the countless wings which it lends to the waves transfigured into blue griffins, to the travelling sands, or to some fallen bird.

I was alone with the keeper, that is, as alone as I'd be without him or as he'd be without me. And still, when I approached the lighthouse, the keeper was overwhelmed with a worry he was uselessly trying to hide. He lived in a world of his own, where one could never be alone. And maybe the very thought of that world which I could never comprehend had changed him now, when everything was coming to its conclusion.

On a whim, I asked him about the Levantines, mostly out of a need to speak to him rather than hoping he would give me any clarification. This time I was wrong. He reacted, looked

around, his eyelids drew in, letting a piercing look show through, and he answered in an abrupt voice:

“You can rest assured we will see them again. We’ll see them right here – and not too long from now. And if it happens that they don’t show up, you will be even happier, as I will be ruined. Don’t you fool yourself into thinking they didn’t know about all your days and nights here. If they didn’t show it to you, it’s because they didn’t have the chance yet: other things are on their minds and in their pursuit right now. Some end up doing what they can’t comprehend, and others were given to comprehend more than could ever be done.”

XX

I’d lie if I said I was scared. I never felt such thing. For the ones that worship the sea, fear is unknown to them, because their soul can only feel emptiness at times, and the thirst for windy desolated spaces makes them inhuman, it robs and ravishes their life.

Two days had passed in a deafening silence. The Levantines hadn’t shown up. The fire in the lagoon perished in the horizon, leaving behind a burned, plagued field, and on its stretch, in the sunset, rusty mirrors gleamed from place to place. Alone with the keeper, I spent my time in an ambiguous waiting and again I felt like we were getting closer to each other. This time it was him who attempted getting closer, and I was troubled, because I couldn’t manage to make sense of it except by engaging in vague and dark premonitions.

The desolation was taking over. Sporadic wind gusts blew away the ashes of the former settlement of the fishermen, where, one morning, like an omen, a dead dolphin appeared. Apollinaris the priest was nowhere to be seen; surely, hearing about the departure of his parishioners, he didn’t bother to care for our souls. Not that he would have been of any help to us; for anything that could happen to us there, the wooden cross was sufficient, and if need be, any of us would have known how to hang it, tied loose, around the other’s neck.

The keeper would always stare in the distance, as if he wanted, or perhaps didn't want, to see something. He walked around with his huge old binoculars, using them to watch over the horizon from time to time. There was nothing to see except the waves and the seagulls circling in the air or floating on the waters, far away, prowling for fish in the depths with their glassy eyes.

The third night of our solitude, the keeper grabbed my shoulders, and spoke with a voice that seemed so different than that of the man that I had come to know:

“Tomorrow at dawn, before light, I’m going to the lagoon. If you wish to come with me, I’d be happy. I feel that we are somewhat alike, and that’s why I think this trip won’t leave you indifferent. I saw how your eyes lit up when you heard the priest mentioning the dog in the lagoons. Now you have the chance to hear it barking from up close.”

XXI

After a good part of the journey we saw the light of day. With the daybreak, the sight was even more daunting. We were right in the middle of a stretch of ashes and embers. A dead land, blank, populated only by the black figures of charred willows, surrounded by incredibly clear patches of water, which I avoided, following a direction that was totally unknown to me. Here and there, green marshes formed, with short plants growing in bunches. The blaze had probably passed over them and now they were growing oddly in the wilderness ravaged by fire; gloomier, more lifeless than the ashes around, like a weird mushroom growing on a dead body.

Unexpectedly, the sky turned red from the sun about to rise. We made it to the shore of a lake with waters rippled by the light breeze in the air. As far as the eye could see, the lake was surrounded by the same deserted land, a sign that the fire had advanced around it. In the middle of the lake there was an island, near to the farthest shore, and on the island –

the same charred willows, like a dense everglade, blackening the view towards something concealed.

We set off in the direction where the island seemed closer to the shore, and after a short walk we found ourselves in front of an unusual settlement with the air of surreal death. It appeared there had been a wooden bridge connecting the island to the shore, but the fire had destroyed it and only the bridge's burnt posts were now left, barely visible over the water, among a few floating trunks.

We improvised a small raft and we set off to the island. Black poplars and willows guarded us. Shadows from a nightmare, charred crowns and trunks, twisted like reptiles. It used to be a dense everglade, meant to hide the lake house which we discovered in the middle of the island. A large but low house, with tempered clay walls, was the only thing the flames had left almost untouched, after burning only its roof. The other trunk-built dwellings were a sure prey for the fire and now looked like piles of char.

Before the fire, that settlement must have been so well hidden that nobody would have been able to find it, even if they foolishly wandered off in the reed land. Involuntarily, I remembered the priest's words and I felt a shiver down my spine when I entered the low house, after forcing the narrow, sheet-covered door together with the keeper.

Everything seemed deserted, with the ambience of a burial vault. I was tense as if I was about to see a flock of giant owls, exiled souls from old and dark ages, take flight from the first room we entered. The walls were blackened with smoke and adorned with strange symbols, as if for a secret ritual, around a big bird which was drawn on the back wall. The air was heavy, and as soon as we'd enter a room, the keeper would break the small windows with the stock of his rifle. His face looked transfigured, bathed by a light that made him look ageless, like the undead arising after centuries to tread again upon paths of the past. Not even his facial features were the same: they had changed, they had come undone, looking like they returned from an ancient night, where they had roamed estranged.

In a room that looked bigger than all the others, a part of the ceiling had collapsed, and it was pitch dark, as the windows were covered with black curtains. As soon as we entered there, we got struck by the putrefying, dense air. We rushed to the windows, ripping open the curtains, breaking the windows, and, petrified, we looked around while holding our breath: on the ground there were lying six dead old people, with clenched faces, white, with bushy eyebrows and long beards, which made them look alike. They were tall and robust. All were wearing grey linen pants and shirts, fastened with wide leather belts, and knee-high boots. They seemed to have died naturally, because they had no burn marks. One of them, whose red belt had silver studs, was holding a small case of purple velvet and bronze locks. The keeper rushed to open it, but he found it was empty. Someone had been there before him.

Coming back to his senses, he then looked around and involuntarily asked: “*But where’s the seventh?*” He seemed to know something of what we were witnessing, and anticipated what might had happened. And yet, he was about to find out something he had never guessed.

XXII

I didn’t think I had been in the abandoned house for too long, and yet when I got out, it was already midday. A yellow circle grew on the horizon, bleeding on the metallic surface of the lake, as if it were kindled from the inside, and somewhere, not too far away, I heard two wild horses. It was past the edges of where the fire had stopped, and we looked that way. Behind a burnt strip, there was another body of water, not too large, and beyond it, the willows and reeds expanded.

If we had followed the shore around the lake for a few kilometers, we could have reached that point, therefore, once again crossing the narrow passage that from island by raft, we

set off into that direction. The keeper would roll his eyes, looking around carefully, as if he was afraid of some stranger's presence, but nobody was around; we were the only ones giving life to the still land.

Again, we passed by green sunken swamps, and we crossed paths with slain trees, which begged the rising skies with their contorted arms, like kings blinded by the burning swords of the enemy, begging at the gates of a sleeping citadel. The silence was persistent, heavy and threatening. The silence that hides its claws, a silence that nests into the empty tombs and watches over everyone's death. To the first eagle I saw up in the air, flying in large circles, and to the first frogs from the shore, I smiled like saluting the messengers of a lively pond, which finally welcomed us, after a long journey through the wastelands of fiery death.

The water's shoreline was winding, and after a few turns we found ourselves in front of the water beyond which the jungle of reeds grew unaltered, dotted by random willow clusters yellowed by the first signs of fall. As I watched, suddenly the reeds convulsed like in a haste and in a moment a few horses sprang out. They had surely been scared by something and, coming to a stop on the shore in front of us, they twisted and disappeared in the bushes. Who could have scared them? The only thing we could do was to wait, therefore we dropped to the ground, eyes peeled in the direction the horses came from. The keeper looked through a pair of big binoculars.

After a while, we felt a rumble and a rider appeared, half hidden in the reeds. The horse – tall, slender and black – stood with his head towards us. Behind the mane there was a woman, and behind her, the indistinct face of a man. The keeper smothered his cry of surprise dropping his binoculars, and, once I picked them up and looked through, I recognized the woman's face. It was the same one, I couldn't be wrong. The one that lured me into the dark hut, where I was brutally struck by him – who else than the man sitting behind her on the horse? He was her master and her man.

Observing carefully, I saw a man well passed his middle age, with noble and beautiful traits, taut just like the horse he was riding. He was wearing clothes similar to the ones the dead old folks wore in the house that we had just been to a few hours before. “*So here’s the seventh*”, I told myself. “*The seventh, the seventh*”, the keeper repeated with a strangled voice next to me. And the seventh was none other than Apollinaris the priest.

XXIII

It was him, although he seemed different, and I realized that, until then, I had never taken a good look at him, I had never noticed his face. He had none of the madness that had prevented me from seeing him before. Or maybe it was just now that his face brightened up from his real madness. Otherwise, the same grey locks, same moustache, same beard framed his long face. Only his eyes were not the same. They were big, clear, intense, and had a shade of night, or rather of dusk.

The keeper, waking up from his stupor, slowly pulled his rifle from the shoulder and pointed at the rider. When he pulled the trigger and the boom resonated, the horse, scared by something, twisted around and the bullet missed it. That moment, the rider turned around and disappeared in the reeds. The keeper leaned his forehead against the gun and remained like that for a long time. Then, after standing up, we began our way back.

We stopped by the island house again, we could tell that meantime someone had been there, but the keeper didn’t seem worried. “*You’re late, you bastards*,” he said to himself, and entered the big room. We found it empty: the six dead people had vanished. On the wall with mysterious symbols and the bird with open wings, someone had written something with Greek letters, and the keeper translated it once I asked him to: *Blessed be the soul of the hierophant.*

There was no one around. The sun set lower, descending and growing like a golden shield. We were walking fast; I don't know why we were in a hurry, as we weren't expected anywhere. We made it to the shore when the shadow of dusk, giant and red, tainted the seagulls, and the lighthouse spread its bloody figure on the waters.

The sea was restless. A boat drifted towards the horizon, with the sail bulged by the wind. The faces of the two men inside weren't visible anymore, but it wasn't hard to guess those were the Levantines. We watched them in silence, both of us, close together like two petrified obelisks on the shore, until the horizon and the darkness swallowed them.

The keeper was back to his absent-mindedness and now, he was the same I had met when I set foot on the sand between the sea and the lagoon. His facial features disappeared again, and when I saw him lying down on the bench at the foot of the lighthouse, he just looked like he always did: a dead man who had no one to close his eyelids.

XXIV

The fall progressed. The days were fading. The days were enfolded in blue mist. The air quivered above the chained waves, which were my home, and at night, the cold stars, deepened into their orbit, dreamt of reed lashes. Only the lighthouse, which killed its butterflies, had the smirk of an Asian deity, hidden in stone, treacherous, watching its devotees from the shadows.

I developed a phobia of its greenish light which flooded the land night after night. It seemed to me that I was learning, unwillingly, to look like the keeper, and that I was getting deeper into a timeless world. I even lost the feeling of solitude, although the land I continued to live on was more deserted than ever. Maybe that's why I was overjoyed to see the harbour boat approach the lighthouse one morning.

I think I said goodbye to the keeper, although I don't remember. I only caught a glimpse of the restless sea and a yellow line fading in the horizon. A shore I'm not meant to ever see again.

At the harbour, I only found my uncle after a few days search. He wasn't on board of the pilot boat that guided the ships afar. He had associated with some merchants who were bringing, in a small, feeble boat, some contraband goods, who knows where from. He was surprised to see me alive and told me that a tall, robust and dark woman, whom he gave a ride in his boat a while back, said I had died in the lagoons during a wolf hunt, together with two of her friends who were shipwrecked on the lighthouse shore.

He was more estranged and uncaring than he appeared during our first meet and I was sickened to see him again. Maybe he realized what I felt, because he brought me to a tavern in the harbour and, sitting us down, told me:

"You need to know that I have never been and I am not any kind of uncle to you. Only my name is the same as your uncle's, whom I met a while back in a harbour where he saved me from a fight. Since then, a long time has passed, and we remained friends. And I paid my dues, by turning myself in to jail instead of him, so he could run until things were cleared. You shouldn't be sorry. You met him as well. Your uncle is the lighthouse keeper, the one that hosted you, without even knowing that you were his nephew. Don't get upset and don't be sad. His life is under the sign of curse and secrecy. And it's best that you don't know the very little I know!"

I got out of the tavern drunk and dumbfounded. For hours I just lay at the quay, on my back, face towards the sky, watching the clouds and listening to the murmur of the harbour. I would remember the lighthouse and the sea at its foot. I would see the desolation of the narrow beach and the lagoon changing colours and being humiliated by ashes. But above all, in my mind I would see the face of the one I had found out the belated truth about; a truth which, known earlier, would have changed my life path significantly.

Today I'm smiling with the indifference that is my lifelong treasure. But back then, I was boiling with the ardor of my eighteen years, and, blinded by it, I rushed to meet the man I formerly knew as my uncle, begging him to help me look for the real one. Begging him to take me away from there, back to the lighthouse shore.

His answer made me realize the futility of my efforts. The keeper wasn't to be found at the lighthouse anymore. Besides, his keeper job was nothing but a short interlude in his strange existence. He had spotted him on the quay shortly before meeting me. He was getting ready to leave on a voyage. He inquired whether the boat had taken a priest with a troubled mind and a nun from around the Eastern shores. And, upon hearing that they had indeed left on the boat right the day before, he boarded the next boat to leave the harbour towards Levant.