

“Painting” Sites

Seth Price, 2000

Appeared as the spoken word narration in the video “Painting” Sites.

In the wild woods west of the Harz mountains lived a man named Ludwig Tieck. Ludwig was a poor gamesman, descended from fishing stock, and his people had farmed this corner of the land for centuries. He was not married, although he saw quite a bit of a young village woman named Bertha. Now, God had not been disposed to bless this woman with a fertile womb, so the couple’s relations were those of good friends, warm companions who took a quiet pleasure in one another’s company, whether it be on long walks in the woods gathering herbs, or evenings spent around a fire sharing memories of their youth.

Bertha was a modest sort, while Ludwig was inward-looking and often disposed to spells of ill feeling. When with company he was sunny and gay, the picture of robust good humour, but when alone he often fell deep into a melancholia from which naught could shake him. At these times Bertha grew worried, and would divert herself by collecting herbs and stones and arranging them in order.

One damp autumn evening they sat thus, the gloomy darkness pressing on the windows, the only sounds the sighing of the wind in the trees and the crackle of the flames on the open hearth. Fresh logs were put on the fire, and, as their spirits rose, the two became more and more deeply engrossed in their conversation. When the servants had left, the one laid his hand on that of the other and said, “My friend, let me attempt to allay your fears and worries. I wish to tell you the story of how I came to be cursed thus. It is a remarkable tale.”

“Why, that would indeed give me pleasure,” came the reply, and with that they resumed their seats at the fire. Presently a fresh bottle of wine was produced, and the dinner dishes cleared away. It was approaching midnight, and a gibbous moon could be seen peeking through the rapidly moving clouds. Out on the moors, a mist was rising from the sodden greensward. At the bottom of the chalk cliffs night waves came rolling in, each larger than the last, to hurl themselves against the sharp rocks of the shore.

“When I was a boy,” he began, “faith visited upon me the particular cruelty of an overbearing and a tyrannical mother, who would beat me with no provocation and no warning. My father, a broken-backed woodcutter, had no voice in the household, and would come home from a day on the heath only to drink himself senseless on mead. The cruelty was that my mother loved me intensely, despite the fact that I could learn neither to sew nor to spin, and as a result my paradoxical situation would fill my mind with wondrous visions of a fanciful world in which the birds and the beasts talked, and all man dropped to their fours and passed their days in idleness.

One day, while my father wept bitterly, my mother came at me with her harangue, that I was no use to the house, that I couldn’t learn a craft, and that I’d never pass on the family seed. Scarcely aware of what I was doing, I leapt up and, seizing a bellows from the hearth, commenced to beat her about the neck and shoulders. At this my father’s eyes became as wide as saucers and he jumped to his feet with a cry, although whether it was a cry of joy or of horror I will never know, but, struck by his voice I let fall the weapon, astonished at what I’d done. But my mother lay silent and cold at my feet. And at this moment I felt so utterly forsaken and friendless that I turned tail and fled, and it was the last I saw of my dear father.

For several days I bore eastward through the foothills, gradually making my way higher and higher into the North Country. The air grew sharp, and made a sinister keening sound as it passed through the crags and ravines. By night I would find a mossy bank on which to make my bed, only to lie awake in the darkness, each noise weirder than the last, capturing my already racing mind with visions of dire apparitions. On one such night I jumped at a sound more frightful than most, and unknowingly catapulted myself off the edge of the rise and into the void. And in that moment of free fall I thought of my mother’s face, and I turned slightly to see, or at least I thought I saw, her burning eyes careering at me from the blackness. And at that instant, my head struck something sharp, and I knew no more.

When I woke, the sun was high overhead and my nostrils were filled with the scent of oleander, and of marrow. I could feel that my fall had not had grave consequences, but I felt sore in every joint, and an anxiety took hold of me. I rose unsteadily, and I shall never forget the sight of that morning. My fall had landed me in some kind of glen, nestled in the crook of a hidden hill and encircled by towering precipices. Directly to the south was the yawning maw of a chasm, and the shreds of morning mist there were ablaze with sun, as if a flock of ghostly sheep was drifting closer with

each breath of wind. Wondrous at being alive, I clambered to my feet, my temples throbbing. For a time I simply paced around my environs, rubbing my crown, yet gradually, as the morning wore on, my astonishment at being alive faded into an anguished frustration, for I could see no way out of this joyful dell. A deathly hush pervaded the area, as if the air itself were trapped with me. On one side was a sheer rock face, and on the other, empty air. And beyond lay the entire North Country, spread out below, like a hazy quilt stretching to the horizon.”

He paused momentarily and reached for the flagon of ale. Filled with fear and pity, the other sprang up and clutched him to her ample bosom. “Lords!” she cried, “For you, I am as good as dead. My beautiful partner, my dearest one. Give me a kiss, that I may feel your lips on mine, and then I shall take my leave of you.” Ludwig burst into tears, and made to hold his wife to him. Drawing her into his arms, he clasped her to his breast briefly, and then turned and strode away. And she clapped her hand to her mouth in terror, for upon his back was a black and nebulous thing. With a cry she dropped her knitting. The noise of the fire rose up in the silence, and he stopped perfectly still. Her eyes darted to the woodsman’s hatchet propped in the far corner of the cottage. Outside, the moon had disappeared over the horizon, and a deep calm reigned.

“Do you see my husband, what has taken hold of you? You’re as one bewitched! You speak of things I do not know.” Ludwig moved slightly, but remained turned away from her, his shoulders squared, the firelight glinting in the wet eyes of the thing. And then he leapt at the door, and with a burst of speed was gone into the night, and the thing with him.

Well, two years passed. Bertha’s heart hardened more with each passing day. The villagers came to see her as an outcast and a misfit, and weeks would go by when she saw not a soul, and spoke to no one. Maddening was this time, and she took to rambling walks in the woods, which still grew freely in those days. One evening she was returning from such a walk when an odd sound gave her pause. It seemed that a chorus of eerie voices was coming slowly nearer, but she could see very little in the gathering dusk. And then, over the rise ahead, there came a funeral procession, bearing a simple wooden casket.

Approaching one of the hooded brethren, she inquired as to whose death was thus marked. The man stopped and addressed her, although his eyes came to rest on a point somewhere beyond her. “This is the cold body of a beautiful woman,” he said, “One whose time on this earth gave joy to many, and, could you look upon her, your

heart too might be uplifted. You know, rare is it that a maiden such as this comes to us. But you see, she was killed while giving birth to a beautiful boy.” And with that he resumed his shuffling gait, leaving Bertha to gaze after them with morbid fascination. Well, here, she thought, was a tragedy which shamed her bitterness: Ludwig was merely missing in the world, but there is naught more powerful than the death of a lovely woman. And right there and then, Bertha resolved to find this beautiful baby boy and to rear him as she could not rear her own flesh and blood. And so she set out after the procession. For a fortnight she shadowed them as they made their steady way eastward, always keeping her eyes on the faint light of their torches. She had left her old life behind. This mad pursuit came to be, for her, an end which might redeem her wasted and lost years in the village. And finally, unbelievably, they came to a strange and wondrous land of which she had never heard tell, and whose sights she hadn't seen save in the deepest slumber. All gentle swells of grass it was, and perfumed grottoes leading to stone bridges over winding streams. Not a city was to be seen. Instead it seemed to be a garden without end, in which the lustrous flowers and enchanted dells shared their space with charming pagodas, pyramids and spires. Arresting one of the solemn brethren, Bertha made to ask how this vision was called, yet he merely looked through her, a touch of sadness in his stare, and then passed on around the bend. Forgetting momentarily her quest, she knelt by a clear brook for to slake her thirst, and because the bank was so soft and the water so sweet, she was soon dead to the world, her face finally peaceful, shaded by the gently nodding heads of the poppies which there flourished.

Well, great was her fatigue, and thus it was nearly dark when she awoke, a hundred dreams thronging around her head. For a time she lay there, unaware of where she was. And then she leapt to her feet, taken by sudden apprehension. “Do not fear,” came a voice hard behind her, and an old man in a grey coat appeared, removing his hat and bowing modestly. “You are welcome here,” he said, and proceeded to take her by the arm and lead her away from the stream. All around them the gloaming was settling gently, all quiet and lavender, enlivened by the lamps of the fireflies and the sounds of the nightbirds. “You seek peace,” said Giles, for that was his name, “and here you may find it.” Together, they made their way to his humble and comfortable home, whereupon he commenced to make Bertha welcome. Her nerves calmed, she accepted his hospitality, even momentarily forgetting her worries and her mission. After a simple but filling meal, they fell to talking around the fire, and Giles obliged her with the story of how he had come to this gentle land.

“I was raised in a simpler time,” he began, “when the world was young, and men still had in their hearts that spark of goodness. Now, my family was a family of goatherds, and each morning we drove the flock to feed upon the green spots that are here and there to be found on the mountainside. In the evenings I sometimes thought it too late to drive my charges home, so I would shut them up in a spot in the woods where the old ruined walls of some long-deserted castle had been left standing. Well, one such night I had pent up my goats for to count them and allow them to rest for the night, when I noticed that there was one missing. I recounted my flock, and then I searched everywhere, but to no avail. Shaking my head, I bedded down for the night. No sooner than I had laid my head on my rucksack when a tapping noise brought me to my feet, and there stood my lost goat, on two legs, an odd gleam in his eye. Deathly afraid, I brought out my knife, but it was not necessary, for my goat turned tail and was gone into the night. Deeply troubled, I went to count the flock, only to see that the long ruined castle was in fact alive and well, with not a crack in its façade, its battlements guarded by squires in mail, its walls echoing with the speech of long-dead courtiers. Closer I came and yet no one took notice, even as I traversed the moat and entered the inner courtyard. It was as if I were a phantom, drifting through the life of a bygone age, unobserved, yet powerless.”