

Marion Poschmann

The Position of the Sun

A Novel
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1 Prologue: *Sol invictus*

The sun is crumbling. When the dining hall is busy, the heavy footfalls make everything vibrate, and it rains stucco from the ceiling. From the heart of the sun hangs the cable for the chandelier, a GDR-era model. Brass bars radiate from the central axis, cones of frosted glass shielding the light bulbs at the end of each except for the crowns, which are shaped like tiny radiant cornucopias, imitation suns.

The stucco sun above is only half there. At every mealtime, bits of plaster fall to the floor. Once a piece fell into a patient's soup. Since then they've rearranged the tables so that the middle of the room is empty. After every meal the linoleum is covered in specks of white, a fine dust, sometimes larger pieces. After every meal the room has to be wiped down.

Shapeless grey rags lie drying on the radiators; a suffocating, all-erasing grey, which has been swallowing this dust for years, continues to swallow it, and only in the breaks hangs limp and damp over the radiator. In between the drying rags, metal plant reliefs climb the white-painted ribs, old-fashioned, elegant foliage that collects the dust, the accumulated dirt lending an almost noble sense of depth and chiaroscuro. Hard acanthus garlands, difficult to clean, a maid would be required, to run a feather duster between the ribs, sending bits of fluff flying, or to poke around with one of those sticks with plastic bristles that look like oversized bottle-brushes, in glowing neon colours like a fairground, and in their sterility perhaps more suitable for an establishment such as ours.

The manor house is insignificant and dilapidated. Not a royal, but a comital estate, for a while it was up for sale for 1 Deutschmark. When it proved impossible to find a private investor, the state established a sanatorium here. Makeshift at first, with the endless delays and sudden bursts of activity that characterise bureaucratic decision-making, we moved in here, into this building in desperate need of renovation. Before the renovations, which will in fact be a painstaking restoration, can begin, we have to wait for the necessary funds to be approved. Until then, the sanatorium has all the charm of a haunted house, desolate, cobwebbed, spellbound. Those of the inhabitants who, like me, are from the West, may be excited about the dark romanticism of the place, the rooms that look like film sets, the

visible history, which where we're from has been cleaned up as far as possible, reproduced in sanitised form or else completely erased from the landscape. The ones who, like me, are from the West are here because we made the most of the chaos of reunification, when suddenly there were jobs to be had in the East.

In the former GDR, as a rule, all available manor houses, estates, castles and hunting lodges were repurposed as sanatoria, mental hospitals, retirement homes and prisons. In the West too, baroque palaces and monasteries are used to house so-called inmates, because it's practical, because these people have got to stay somewhere, because the buildings would otherwise be empty. In the East, it wasn't just a question of practicality, it was a matter of principle. The lofty was to be made lowly. The feudal proletarian. The beautiful banal, the exclusive communally available.

Our estate served as a military hospital during the Second World War, then it was used to house forced labourers, as a depot, as a chemistry lab. Now it forms part of the psychiatric clinics that were expanded after reunification. The number of cases has not increased so far. But the patients are afforded more space. They no longer have to sleep ten to a room. They are allowed to figure in the consciousness of the general population. They are allowed to exist.

The patients are housed in the outbuilding, the former cavaliers' house. The windows are barred and the interiors are more

basic. The communal spaces and treatment rooms are in the main building, which is also where the doctors live, and the former reception hall has been converted into a gymnasium.

Many of the patients have nerve-fraying habits or else acquire them the moment they are admitted. They scratch incessantly at the paint around the windows with their fingernails, they wear down the linoleum by riding their chairs slowly and determinedly from one end of the room to the other day in and day out. What the onward march of time takes long years to accomplish, they can do in a few months. They accelerate the decline, as if the force of time were concentrated in them, as if they were living several lives at once, all battling to find a way out of that overcrowded body, as if the energy of ruin, whose inexorable work is usually barely perceptible, streamed out of them in great surges, uncontrollably, senselessly, against the norm.

The sun is shining in through the dusty windows of the dining hall. The wrinkles in the people's faces grow deeper, carving out grey shadowy furrows that weren't noticeable before, as if age had come suddenly over night and taken up residence: a past inextricable from their bodies. Our job is to work with that which comes to light when the sun shines, the inevitable that we run away from at night in dreams and fantasies. The patients blink when a ray strikes them, they squint, shy away. Our job is to work with that which the day to day usually covers up like a merciful blanket of clouds.

The sun makes the heavy white crockery gleam, and right away Mr. P pulls his sleeve over the heel of his hand and begins to wipe his cup wherever the sun is reflected.

The dull clacking of cups on saucers, the piercing song of cutlery on plates.

Cure them—of what? Of the sun's rising and setting, of the morning light that falls on the tables through the eastern windows, before making its inexorable round and coming in from the west in the evening, fatalistic, vigilant, inescapable?

It does a sweep of the dining hall, illuminating the SprelaCart tables and the simple chairs, the purblind mirrors that hang in between the windows, creating the dizzying effect of looking out of and into the room at the same time: parts of overgrown boxwood hedges, untended lawns, scruffy yew tree pyramids. Parts of tea trolleys stacked with used institutional crockery, being pushed along by tired arms.

It illuminates the opulent oil paintings, which have perhaps survived only because you can barely see what's on them: badly darkened bouquets of flowers and fruit, cherries with angular highlights, blackened wine and the bodies of dead animals that meld into the background.

At least the paintings appear to be stable and lend a sense of stability to us too, as if nothing ever changed, as if the present were already eternity, as if time ran over those bodies like a babbling stream of water, as if time were nothing but a cleansing ritual for bodies, preserving their inviolate state, rejuvenating them, rather than something that permeates them permanently, leaving a sediment, deforming, reshaping and dissolving them,

the body of the rabbit hanging by its hind legs, the round shimmering body of the orange between the glasses, the body of the cook, cooly bowing his head and presenting a tray, waiting, contorted and bent forward, for approval. As if such waiting were the most urgent task in a time that shapes and fills out the body, a wait for a future in which that body will finally assume its place, a wait for the narrow, damp space where it will find rest.

I am lying in my bed in the duty room. The refrigerator in the hallway is rattling; the floor is trembling. Small vibrations travel up the bed frame, electrifying me, keeping me awake like a full moon at night. I've left the lamp on my bedside table on, the one with the plastic imitation canvas shade. My monasterial bed with its high, ornately carved headboard, its heavy springs, its pearwood veneer, creaks even when I'm not moving. It is framed by a black border, as if I were sleeping inside my own obituary notice.

My window is open. I can hear the sound of the patients' television in the outbuilding across the park. There is a tendency to compensate for the bad picture by turning the volume up to maximum. I, too, have got an old black and white TV with poor reception. It shows several programmes at once, one in the foreground through which flit shadows, silhouettes, blurry images. The ones in the background, which sometimes grow sharper and distort the rest beyond recognition. The patients often complain loudly about this. The boy who is doing his

community service here is forever being sent up onto the roof to adjust the antenna and fix the picture. The improvements are minimal, but the patients calm down for a while if they get the sense that we are willing to do things for them, making an effort, that something is happening.

The nights vary according to your dreams. The days are the same.

Nothing has changed, already night has fallen again. I put on my shoes and throw my doctor's coat on over my pyjamas.

I cross the dining hall without making a sound. Even at night, when no one is there, it still smells of sweaty tracksuits. The inmates prefer to wear sportswear, as if this were a summer camp, or a training camp. They wear comfortable clothes that don't restrict the body, presumably because one's body feels restricted enough in here as it is. It is cared for, protected, examined, it pushes up against the boundaries of a strict routine set by others.

Adjacent to the dining hall is the billiard room. It was once the countess's dressing room, now there is a coat rack made of thin metal rods on the wall, hooks and a hat rack, all bare bones functional. No one has ever used it. The billiard room is unpopular; it is permeated by the smell from the bathroom facilities, which haven't been renovated in decades, where the cubicles have no doors, and where the pipes seem to store up the odours of years gone by. The bathrooms are still in use, but people avoid the billiard room. Only the community service boy

sometimes comes in here, shoots a billiard ball across the felt, sits down on the chair next to the yucca palm, to escape the patients' company for a while.

The communal rooms are all adjacent, laid out end to end, forming a circle. I walk into the billiard room and out of it again, I get to the library, three meagre bookshelves in a large hall. Shiny tentacles wave above my head. The chandelier doesn't hang in the middle of this room under the stucco rosette, but rather a little off centre, to illuminate the reading area. A cable leads from the heart of the rosette along the ceiling before lowering the light with its cut glass drops like a shining crystal jellyfish into the room, a jellyfish whose hard glass tentacles jangle faintly whenever someone opens the door. It is a simple gust of air that sets the late baroque lustre in motion, but to me it seems like a tremor, the quiet agitation which is ordinarily pent up inside every human body and which is picked up by the objects in this place, as if there were a storm blowing.

I get up at least once a night and wander through these deserted halls like a ghost. I turn the lights on and off, I tread carefully so as not to make a sound. I am driven on by an unbearable sense of unrest. As though I must get to the bottom of the pain that hangs in these rooms. A pain that I cannot grasp, but which, since I have been here, I feel it is my purpose to try to grasp.

The crystal lustre in the library is one of the few moveable parts of the inventory that have survived the wars, occupations, depredations and sell-offs unscathed. The collection of vases

was deposited here more recently and forgotten. The original furnishings, the armchairs, rococo credenzas, small marble tables, intarsia cabinets, are now in Russia. At night, I imagine these missing pieces, which feels tasteless and false, it devalues the things that are actually here.

I make my round, I return to my room, hang my coat on the hook on the back of the door, place my shoes under the bed, lie back down.

When I first moved in here there were big cross spiders in the space the double windows of my room. Their spiral webs were stretched between the frames, they were startlingly beautiful, delicate and symmetrical like the diaphanous porcelain in the Chinese cabinet. I didn't dare move, I stood there, suitcase still in hand, frozen in the door, while the nurse who had accompanied me opened the windows and unceremoniously picked up one spider after the other with her bare hands and carefully threw them outside. Some scurried in panic off the windowsill and into the room; the nurse caught them. She cleared the webs away with a brush, I almost felt sorry for the animals and all their hard work. Since then they have resumed their construction, not quite as elaborately as it was, so I can still open one of the windows. In the other I observe them. They work at night.

There is a constant musty smell in the air here; so far they have avoided having to tear down the wallpaper to check for mildew. The wall coverings cannot simply be replaced, they would need to be carefully removed and restored. The musty smell turns into a constant mouldy taste in your mouth. And it

feels like the house is decaying in my oral cavity, as if the more I speak of it, the faster it decays, more and more, showers of stucco, pieces of sun, plaster dust. I grind my teeth at night. I sleep badly.

Outside the sun rises and sets. In the house, the wreaths and circles fall apart. The stucco rosettes shrink, the ceiling fresco Aurora decomposes, the grass eats into the park's radial axes. Outside the sun rises and sets, whilst all our imitations are transient. Failed suns, suns gone under—these earthly remains are gathered all over in the house, extinguished suns made of grey stained lime wood hang over the doors to the dining hall, doorknobs that once were golden and are now tarnished, worn down suns, blinded suns, above all the darkened suns in the musty sanatorium chapel which ring the pulpit and are practically black from the soot in the air, from the damp breath that settles like a dismal human layer over the shine, quenching the fire, dimming it so that you can stare at it with the naked eye without suffering any damage, but also without catching light.

Sun ships, broken suns, baroque suns. Their filtered rays around the altar, their shadowrays bursting forth from imaginary clouds; the dust that usually dances in them has settled on their surface and covered them: a soft, grey coat to assimilate them as much as possible to the mundane.

Outside the sun rises and sets. Where is outside, I ask myself when I leave the grounds, tired after my shift. From the

gatehouse arch, the stony eye of the Almighty in its triangular frame watches my comings and goings.

Often I myself do not know whether I stay here as a doctor or a patient. (It is the same for everyone, I assume.) The differences fade away as soon as you realise that it is only the status one adopts, the power at one's disposal, which projects the image of a stable personality, and that only by the grace of mysterious Providence do I get to wear the white coat and not the others.

I tell my tale from the solar observatory. The doctor's all-seeing eye.

A position of distance, of general overview. I spread my constant attention evenly upon everything. And yet at least half of it eludes my gaze, the night side, the spots that lie in shadow. The interesting part is the half that remains in darkness. The sun shines only on the surface. And what it sees is not necessarily the most important. Not the stuff that matters. Not that which drives a story: the merging of bodies, the creation of intimacy, obliteration, love and hate.

A sunlike narrator, roundly built, with a sunny disposition, who allows himself to make use of artificial lighting on occasion, to operate with streetlights, torches, spotlights, who strives for translucency but must nevertheless be careful that the object of his interest does not get lost in the process.

Whoever shines a light into the bushes at night will startle animals with his counterfeit day, but he will never catch them

sleeping. Shadow can only be inferred. Shadow is wherever my gaze does not fall. And yet, I know it is there, because light emerges out of darkness.