

From *Lazarus among us*

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Translated by Ciaran Lawless

Concentration camp dreams

From the day he arrives in the concentration camp, despite the various horrors of his everyday struggles, the inmate knows to savour all the night may grant. Rising several times in the night due to the diuretic power of the soup, for example, he'd have the occasion to lift his head toward the starry sky, even if walking barefoot in the snow; then he'd dig himself back into sleep, for a few short, intense hours. Thus there formed, as I've already said, a kind of community of impenitent dreamers who from early morning would share with each other their nocturnal impressions.

Landscape-dreams were the most frequent; for the most part immense panoramas stretching out to infinity.

I can't but recall to myself that admirable line of Pierre-Jean

Jouve: "In the distance, meanwhile, are blue mountains like gentle hymns." All our sincerity found refuge among those static horizons, those horizontal lines, truly a landscape of "human innocence." Already the faces of our family had faded away, were lost from view.

It shouldn't be forgotten that we were constantly under the spell of musical remembrances. Music played a not unimportant role among the inmates. Often enough, during the toughest days of that new career, a musical motif would accompany us; it would come to our lips without us knowing its origin or its destiny. Many of us, including myself I'll admit, compiled these fragments. Songs, old melodies, laments, even the most tarnished of scraps came back to us, clearer than our telephone numbers or the names that we fought so hard to retain. All of this, along with those dreams composed so freely, made for a universe at once vexing and impalpable.

Sometimes the landscape-dreams disappeared to make room for dreams of architecture, where the baroque, that art between sky and earth, that art where cloud is worked like wood or marble, is evident in all the dream's assemblages.

High vaults, infinite pillars, aerial sculptures intertwined; around these forms was a plenitude of air; you could breathe better; the body hardly weighed at all.

Here, by way of example, a dream-type:

I came to a cathedral whose roof was lost in mist. Upon the entryway's ceiling, despite its great height, there was nailed a living knight

with his horse; he hardly moved. I continued through to a chapel of uncustomary proportions; there was a massive, gilded baroque altar, composed of giant statues; they supported the whole structure on their slightly trembling shoulders.

An enormous crowd wandered about, in dress of all eras. I passed into a basement where peopled scenes had been reconstructed; there were monks eating; bowls of fruit covered in dust. I came before a large canvas by Breughel that had as its title: *The Underneath of a Table*.

There was a young girl with golden hair stretched out on a long table that stood by the sculpted foot of a pillar; around her the sheet fell; you could see the legs of the dinner-guests. Then the girl gently came to life, and I watched her struggle against the shadows, brutes that tried to drag her into their depths. This silent melee lasted some minutes, then the little girl was immobile again, as was the whole tableau; she went completely flat, in her starched, bright dress; the spectacle was over.

I also walked through museum halls with magnificent furnishings, but the paintings, instead of being on the walls, covered the floorboards; you had to walk over them; one of these pictures showed the interior of a giant peanut.

Certainly paintings played an important role in these dreams; I recall one of my comrades from Luxembourg who, if it can be so put, would place his dream on an easel, so as to reconstruct and paint it.

One morning when I went to see him (he was one of the camp's great dreamers), he related one of his dreams to me. He had seen, with absolute clarity, Lucifer in the form of a fallen angel, multicoloured and dazzling, with enormous wings of immeasurable splendour. He was descending an iron ladder, down a pit of dull, bare stones; he held out his hand to help us go down with him.

This friend of mine didn't just create original backdrops with perfect technical skill, he set stories there, elaborated romances of bewildering depth; intrigues, imbroglios, frustrated love affairs, played out in countries much like Italy.

I should tell you about some other dreams, more prosaic, but also more vexing; all of us had these dreams at least once a week. They were dreams of food, unimaginably precise and luxurious. One of my friends, a respected scientist back home, explained to me one morning, at length, patiently – as though it had been the rarest of insects – the structure, form and composition of the *éclair religieuse* he had eaten in his sleep. You'd wake up with saliva streaming down the sheet. These weren't dreams that came in the dark of night; they always arrived at the edge of dawn.

I want to tell you too of a different series of diabolical dreams, dreams without mercy; they likely came at times of crisis; some of my comrades dreamt they were trapped in a concentration camp; thus, for them, no rest, no respite; dreams themselves wasted away like fruit. And I too came to dream of concentration camps, only

these were idyllic camps. My whole family was there; you could see caverns of some sort, which opened onto grassland; there were even flowers around and trees. Somehow I'd invited my family to spend some time with me there; perhaps it was only I who knew it was a concentration camp.

We never had erotic dreams; our physical deterioration, our dreadful hunger, our fatigue, to which were often added the bitter memories of blows, left us incapable of imagining, even for an instant, a woman we could love or desire; there was a night, just one, where for hours I breathed deep from some feminine hair; "only a woman's hair," as Swift said.

I'm only speaking here of the one category of prisoners I knew well; those who were *Nacht und Nebel*, that is to say, those who received no packages, no news, who were wholly removed from the world of the living.

It is important to emphasise this absence of erotic dreams, this affective void, this castration of sorts; because for certain inmates, this is one of the lasting marks left by the camp, a lack of feeling, the impossibility of tenderness. This was illustrated with terrible clarity by one of my friends, dead since, in those words he murmured to his wife: "I can't come to you, I can't touch you." In certain cases, young men mostly, who had had little contact with women, this could become something far worse if they hadn't the strength to fight off their frightful solitude. I know of many cases.

Certain couples marked by deportation live together in indifference after their return, insensitive to their prior intimacies, the tastes and thoughts they once shared. An important part of their former lives, an essential aspect of their love's continuity, was taken from them. This is most noticeable when the man and woman have been deported at the same time. We can even note a curious and terrible metamorphosis of one in the dream of the other. We could cite the case of a deported woman trying to strangle her husband in the night, because in her nightmare she took him for a member of the Gestapo. In those households where there's a certain, if you will, *camp rivalry*, we witness marked and prolonged silences, absences that surprise neither one nor the other. They live separately, all the while conserving the same rhythm of life, the same ceremonial mundanity. The case becomes more complex when just one half of the couple has been deported, the other never able to understand the behaviour of the former inmate, the *evasions*, the way he keeps his distance with a kind of willed vulgarity, as if wanting to preserve in its purity his Lazarean status.

Finally, it is perhaps unnecessary to underscore the fact that younger inmates were often gripped by a sexual mania upon their arrival in the camps. It is understandable, after all, for the anguishing pressure of *survival* meant that unconsciously they tried to vilify their new existence and supported it only by way of an astonishing egoism, treating it lightly, reducing it to absolute animality.

Dreams of salvation

Now I come to the most important dreams, to the heart of the subject; it is only after some consultation with my fellow inmates that I dare write it.

Up to this point, I haven't spoken of colour in these dreams, because it is light alone that gives them depth. Contrary to what Gérard de Nerval said: "In dreams one never sees the sun," many of our dreams were bathed in sunlight; I can still see before me the ray of light that entered, when I opened the French windows of a sleepy living room, like a sudden inward breath, and how it scattered over an enormous bunch of lilacs, light as white as lightning itself, floating there.

In those dreams dreamt by men lowered to the state of nature, the colours were always faded, barely noticeable blues, light violets; the green of trees was delicate, powerless.

I noticed that often a single colour could dominate certain dreams or be repeated; perhaps a colour that recalled a particular occurrence at the moment of the prisoner's incarceration, or a colour associated with an essential part of his existence, of his faith, for example. This colour might only appear once, to fish the prisoner out of death, for

example, to *hook* his gaze by bedazzlement; or alternatively, it would pursue its luminous journey through more than one dream, and, by its joyous repetition, would change the course of the inmate's life. This colour was the colour of salvation itself, "hoisted to the sail of a dream," declaration of imminent return, of the certainty of return, the formal assurance that the prisoner would emerge alive from his passion, descend from his cross before the twelfth hour or find the exit from the olive garden.

I think of that line of Balzac's I recently re-read, and which gives me strength for what I'm going to write: "If colour is organized light, shouldn't it, as combinations of musical notes do, *have meaning*?"

I don't need to insist on the role of colour, its pull, for poetry; I can just cite Rimbaud, Lautréamont, Lafcadio Hearn, Apollinaire, René Char, etc., the way colours allow for the "correction, embellishment, recasting" of nature and the feelings it inspires in us, occult colours, as some say.

But here, colour, for the man who for weeks, months, years, hasn't but a few instants to live, *saved*; it was the glorious visitation of Grace, the wing-tip in the gloom of night.

The prisoner could be saved by a signature colour; all the invincible reserves of the man could be heard in the "cry" of this sacred and original colour, in this echo of man made visionary, in this instinctual recall of the divine.

Here are the examples I've gathered:

*Dreams with repetition of colour**Blue*

In the dreams I had during my time in the camp, a particular blue would often appear, not diffused throughout the whole vision, but concentrated in a single detail, for example students in a garden; all the rest was seemingly uncoloured; only this deep blue abided. Each time I had a dream marked by this blue, in the morning, getting up, I'd have the clear impression I was protected by it; for a few hours I'd be overrun with a feeling of well-being.

For a time the blue disappeared, but then, one night, I dreamt I was walking down a street; suddenly I noticed my mother leaning out a window; I ran towards her; she extended her two hands toward me, two hands that were blue; I called them the hands of good tidings. I was certain at that moment that I'd return from the hell of the concentration camp.

How could I not reproduce here these lines of Lafcadio Hearn: "Being the visible colour of the soul of our planet, of the world's life's breath, blue is also the visible colour of the enormity of day and the abyss of night."

Green

One of the former inmates I interviewed told me that in his dreams of the camp, during his time there, the doors were the colour green, meaning these were "salutary" doors, and this for him was a sign that he would one day be able to open them.

*Dreams without repetition of colour**But with the explosion of one colour**Red*

One of my friends, a priest, now a teacher, related to me the following facts:

During his detention in the Mauthausen concentration camp, he had the following dream: he found himself with one of his companions in front of Christ nailed to the cross. And all of a sudden Our Saviour burst open and His blood spurted from his gutted body and landed on the two kneeling men.

The priest murmured: "The blood of Christ covers us and protects us, we are saved."

A month later, this priest fell sick; pleurisy was gnawing away at him; he had a fever of 40. Because they considered him a lost cause, the nurses threw the priest out in the snow, completely naked. He lost consciousness and remained for hours unmoving and dying.

Then, he opened his eyes, awoke in a bunker to which he'd been carried, in warmth, in a red cover. The fever had fallen; he was saved.

Let us note, in passing, that red covers were rare in the camps; I, for my part, never saw even one.

A student of law related the following case to me:

He had been arrested during "the time of cherries," toward the month of June. The day of his arrest, his mother told him there'd be time for cherries when he got back home. She could send him a package of cherries in prison. Then he was moved to a concentration camp. He fell ill. The fever rose, and he was certain there wasn't a chance he'd return; his heart gradually slowed. Perhaps he lost consciousness, he didn't know, but suddenly a kind of curtain was unfurled whose colours burst out as if torn from it; it was red returning, the red of cherries.

After the vision had ceased, he opened his eyes; the rhythm of his heart steadied; the fever had fallen; he was able to see his trial to its end. He returned, in the month of June, 1945, in time for cherries.

Dreams with no explosion of colour

Diamond

One of my fellow inmates, an old sailor, very much a realist and very courageous, came to find me one morning in the Gusen concentration camp to tell me the following dream, which had deeply

disturbed him.

He found himself in the middle of the sea on a steamboat. As he leaned over the rail, he noticed a small craft conducted by a man who cried out: "Hey, do you see the sky, sir?" Unable to grasp the meaning of the question, he asked the sailor to repeat it.

The sailor yelled again: "Do you see the sky?" At that moment, my fellow inmate lifted his eyes; a dense mist covered the surface of the water; he could hardly even distinguish the black form of the ship's bow. Then, suddenly, the mist dissipated, the sky tore open, and from the edge of the horizon there rose a huge diamond cross which shone incandescently on the heaving sea. After he'd finished telling me this dream, both of us agreed that this beautiful sign couldn't but "bring luck" to those who experienced it. The dream had done good for both of us. It neatly captured that line of Rimbaud: "On the sea, which I loved as if it could wash a dreadful stain from me, I saw the cross of consolation rise." Perhaps this dream had "secrets that could change life itself." My fellow inmate did get back home, but does he still remember that dazzling, supernatural image, guarantee of his safe return?

We could continue our inquiry with other colours, notably yellow, which came to the dreams of many, but these descriptions risk becoming tedious and may fail to properly *render* the hope that these nocturnal compensations were charged with; they would give a false

idea of the camps, unreal enough, for all those who would like to deny the suffering, the anguish, the great misery of those living dead, and to claim as mere invention all descriptions of those principalities of murder.

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