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PIRANESI

Susanna Clarke

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‘I am the great scholar, the magician, the adept, who is *doing* the experiment. Of course I need subjects to do it *on*.’

The Magician’s Nephew, C.S. Lewis

‘People call me a philosopher or a scientist or an anthropologist. I am none of those things. I am an anamnesiologist. I study what has been forgotten. I divine what has disappeared utterly. I work with absences, with silences, with curious gaps between things. I am really more of a magician than anything else.’

Laurence Arne-Sayles, interview in
The Secret Garden, May 1976.

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PART 1

PIRANESI

When the Moon rose in the Third Northern Hall I went to the Ninth Vestibule

*ENTRY FOR THE FIRST DAY OF THE FIFTH MONTH IN THE YEAR THE ALBATROSS
CAME TO THE SOUTH-WESTERN HALLS*

When the Moon rose in the Third Northern Hall I went to the Ninth Vestibule to witness the joining of three Tides. This is something that happens only once every eight years.

The Ninth Vestibule is remarkable for the three great Staircases it contains. Its Walls are lined with marble Statues, hundreds upon hundreds of them, Tier upon Tier, rising into the distant heights.

I climbed up the Western Wall until I reached the Statue of a Woman carrying a Beehive, fifteen metres above the Pavement. The Woman is two or three times my own height and the Beehive is covered with marble Bees the size of my thumb. One Bee – this always gives me a slight sensation of queasiness – crawls over her left Eye. I squeezed myself into the Woman's Niche and waited until I heard the Tides roaring in the Lower Halls and felt the Walls vibrating with the force of what was about to happen.

First came the Tide from the Far Eastern Halls. This Tide ascended the easternmost Staircase without violence. It had no colour to speak of and its Waters were no more than ankle deep. It spread a grey mirror across the Pavement, the surface of which was marbled with streaks of milky Foam.

Next came the Tide from the Western Halls. This Tide thundered up the westernmost Staircase and hit the Eastern Wall with a great Clap, making all the Statues tremble. Its Foam was the white of old fishbones, and its churning depths were pewter. Within seconds its Waters were as high as the Waists of the First Tier of Statues.

Last came the Tide from the Northern Halls. It hurled itself up the middle Staircase, filling the Vestibule with an explosion of glittering, ice-white Foam. I was drenched and blinded. When I could see again Waters were cascading down the Statues. It was then that I realised I had made a mistake in calculating the volumes of the Second and Third Tides. A towering Peak of Water swept up to where I crouched. A great Hand of Water reached out to pluck me from the Wall. I flung my arms around the Legs of the Woman carrying a Beehive and prayed to the House to protect me. The Waters covered me and for a moment I was surrounded by the strange silence that comes when the Sea sweeps over you and drowns its own sounds. I thought that I was going to die; or else that I would be swept away to Unknown Halls, far from the rush and thrum of Familiar Tides. I clung on.

Then, just as suddenly as it began, it was over. The Joined Tides swept on into the surrounding Halls. I heard the thunder and crack as the Tides struck the Walls. The Waters in the Ninth Vestibule sank rapidly down until they barely covered the Plinths of the First Tier of Statues.

I realised that I was holding on to something. I opened my hand and found a marble Finger from some Faraway Statue that the Tides had placed there.

The Beauty of the House is immeasurable; its Kindness infinite.

A description of the World

ENTRY FOR THE SEVENTH DAY OF THE FIFTH MONTH IN THE YEAR THE ALBATROSS CAME TO THE SOUTH-WESTERN HALLS

I am determined to explore as much of the World as I can in my lifetime. To this end I have travelled as far as the Nine-Hundred-and-Sixtieth Hall to the West, the Eight-Hundred-and-Ninetieth Hall to the North and the Seven-Hundred-and-Sixty-Eighth Hall to the South. I have climbed up to the Upper Halls where Clouds move in slow procession and Statues appear suddenly out of the Mists. I have explored the Drowned Halls where the Dark Waters are carpeted with white water lilies. I have seen the Derelict Halls of the East where Ceilings, Floors – sometimes even Walls! – have collapsed and the dimness is split by shafts of grey Light.

In all these places I have stood in Doorways and looked ahead. I have never seen any indication that the World was coming to an End, but only the regular progression of Halls and Passageways into the Far Distance.

No Hall, no Vestibule, no Staircase, no Passage is without its Statues. In most Halls they cover all the available space, though here and there you will find an Empty Plinth, Niche or Apse, or even a blank space on a Wall otherwise encrusted with Statues. These Absences are as mysterious in their way as the Statues themselves.

I have observed that, while the Statues of a particular Hall are more or less uniform in size, there is considerable variation between Halls. In some places the figures are two or three times the height of a Human Being, in others more or less life size and in yet others, only reach as high as my shoulder. The Drowned Halls contain Statues that are gigantic – fifteen to twenty metres high – but they are the exception.

I have begun a Catalogue in which I intend to record the Position, Size and Subject of each Statue, and any other points of interest. So far I have completed the First and Second South-Western Halls and am engaged on the Third. The enormity of this task sometimes makes me feel a little dizzy, but as a scientist and an explorer I have a duty to bear witness to the Splendours of the World.

The Windows of the House look out upon Great Courtyards; barren, empty places paved with stone. The Courtyards are generally four-sided, although now and then you will come upon one with six sides, or eight, or even – these are rather strange and gloomy – only three.

Outside the House there are only the Celestial Objects: Sun, Moon and Stars.

The House has three Levels. The Lower Halls are the Domain of the Tides; their Windows – when seen from across a Courtyard – are grey-green with the restless Waters and white with the spatter of Foam. The Lower Halls provide nourishment in the form of fish, crustaceans and sea vegetation.

The Upper Halls are, as I have said, the Domain of the Clouds; their Windows are grey-white and misty. Sometimes you will see a whole line of Windows suddenly illuminated by

a flash of lightning. The Upper Halls give Fresh Water, which is shed in the Vestibules in the form of Rain and flows in Streams down Walls and Staircases.

Between these two (largely uninhabitable) Levels are the Middle Halls, which are the Domain of birds and of men. The Beautiful Orderliness of the House is what gives us Life.

This morning I looked out of a Window in the Eighteenth South-Eastern Hall. On the other side of the Courtyard I saw the Other looking out of a Window. The Window was tall and dark; the Other's noble head with its high forehead and neatly trimmed beard was framed in one Corner. He was lost in thought as he so often is. I waved to him. He did not see me. I waved more extravagantly. I jumped up and down with great energy. But the Windows of the House are many and he did not see me.

A list of all the people who have ever lived and what is known of them

ENTRY FOR THE TENTH DAY OF THE FIFTH MONTH IN THE YEAR THE ALBATROSS CAME TO THE SOUTH-WESTERN HALLS

Since the World began it is certain that there have existed fifteen people. Possibly there have been more; but I am a scientist and must proceed according to the evidence. Of the fifteen people whose existence is verifiable, only Myself and the Other are now living.

I will now name the fifteen people and give, where relevant, their positions.

First Person: Myself

I believe that I am between thirty and thirty-five years of age. I am approximately 1.83 metres tall and of a slender build.

Second Person: The Other

I estimate the Other's age to be between fifty and sixty. He is approximately 1.88 metres tall and, like me, of a slender build. He is strong and fit for his age. His skin is a pale olive colour. His short hair and moustache are dark brown. He has a beard that is greying; almost white, it is neatly trimmed and slightly pointed. The bones of his skull are particularly fine with high, aristocratic cheekbones and a tall, impressive forehead. The overall impression he gives is of a friendly but slightly austere person devoted to the life of the intellect.

He is a scientist like me and the only other living human being, so naturally I value his friendship highly.

The Other believes that there is a Great and Secret Knowledge hidden somewhere in the World that will grant us enormous powers once we have discovered it. What this Knowledge consists of he is not entirely sure, but at various times he has suggested that it might include the following:

1. vanquishing Death and becoming immortal
2. learning by a process of telepathy what other people are thinking
3. transforming ourselves into eagles and flying through the Air
4. transforming ourselves into fish and swimming through the Tides
5. moving objects using only our thoughts

6. snuffing out and reigniting the Sun and Stars
7. dominating lesser intellects and bending them to our will

The Other and I are searching diligently for this Knowledge. We meet twice a week (on Tuesdays and Fridays) to discuss our work. The Other organises his time meticulously and never permits our meetings to last longer than one hour.

If he requires my presence at other times, he calls out 'Piranesi!' until I come.

Piranesi. It is what he calls me.

Which is strange because as far as I remember it is not my name.

Third Person: The Biscuit-Box Man

The Biscuit-Box Man is a skeleton that resides in an Empty Niche in the Third North-Western Hall. The bones have been ordered in a particular way: long ones of a similar size have been collected and tied together with twine made from seaweed. To the right is placed the skull and to the left is a biscuit box containing all the small bones – finger bones, toe bones, vertebrae etc. The biscuit box is red. It has a picture of biscuits and bears the legend, *Huntley Palmers* and *Family Circle*.

When I first discovered the Biscuit-Box Man, the seaweed twine had dried up and fallen apart and he had become rather untidy. I made new twine from fish leather and tied up his bundles of bones again. Now he is in good order once more.

Fourth Person: The Concealed Person

One day three years ago I climbed the Staircase in the Thirteenth Vestibule. Finding that the Clouds had departed from that

Region of the Upper Halls and that they were bright, clear and filled with Sunlight, I determined to explore further. In one of the Halls (the one positioned directly above the Eighteenth North-Eastern Hall) I found a half-collapsed skeleton wedged in a narrow space between a Plinth and the Wall. From the current disposition of the bones I believe it was originally in a sitting position with the knees drawn up to the chin. I have been unable to learn the gender. If I took the bones out to examine them, I could never get them back in again.

Persons Five to Fourteen: The People of the Alcove

The People of the Alcove are all skeletal. Their bones are laid side by side on an Empty Plinth in the Northernmost Alcove of the Fourteenth South-Western Hall.

I have tentatively identified three skeletons as female and three as male, and there are four whose gender I cannot determine with any certainty. One of these I have named the Fish-Leather Man. The skeleton of the Fish-Leather Man is incomplete and many of the bones are much worn away by the Tides. Some are scarcely more than little pebbles of bone. There are small holes bored in the ends of some of them and fragments of fish leather. From this I draw several conclusions:

1. The skeleton of the Fish-Leather Man is older than the others
2. The skeleton of the Fish-Leather Man was once displayed differently, its bones threaded together with thongs of fish leather, but over time the leather decayed

3. The people who came after the Fish-Leather Man (presumably the People of the Alcove) held human life in such reverence that they patiently collected his bones and laid him with their own dead

Question: when I feel myself about to die, ought I to go and lie down with the People of the Alcove? There is, I estimate, space for four more adults. Though I am a young man and the day of my Death is (I hope) some way off, I have given this matter some thought.

Another skeleton lies next to the People of the Alcove (though this does not count as one of the people who have lived). It is the remains of a creature approximately 50 centimetres long and with a tail the same length as its body. I have compared the bones to the different kinds of Creatures that are portrayed in the Statues and believe them to belong to a monkey. I have never seen a live monkey in the House.

The Fifteenth Person: The Folded-Up Child

The Folded-Up Child is a skeleton. I believe it to be female and approximately seven years of age. She is posed on an Empty Plinth in the Sixth South-Eastern Hall. Her knees are drawn up to her chin, her arms clasp her knees, her head is bowed down. There is a necklace of coral beads and fishbones around her neck.

I have given a great deal of thought to this child's relationship to me. There are living in the World (as I have already explained) only Myself and the Other; and we are both male. How will the World have an Inhabitant when we are dead? It is my belief that the World (or, if you will, the House, since

the two are for all practical purposes identical) wishes an Inhabitant for Itself to be a witness to its Beauty and the recipient of its Mercies. I have postulated that the House intended the Folded-Up Child to be my Wife, only something happened to prevent it. Ever since I had this thought it has seemed only right to share with her what I have.

I visit all the Dead, but particularly the Folded-Up Child. I bring them food, water and water lilies from the Drowned Halls. I speak to them, telling them what I have been doing and I describe any Wonders that I have seen in the House. In this way they know that they are not alone.

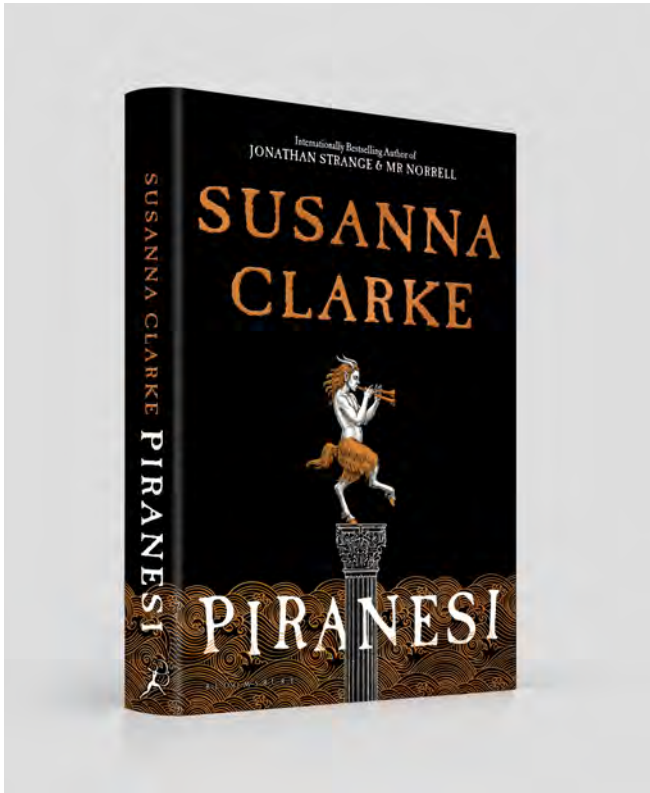
Only I do this. The Other does not. As far as I know he has no religious practices.

The Sixteenth Person

And You. Who are You? Who is it that I am writing for? Are You a traveller who has cheated Tides and crossed Broken Floors and Derelict Stairs to reach these Halls? Or are You perhaps someone who inhabits my own Halls long after I am dead?

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