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Winter's Garden

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Sample translation by Rebecca Morrison

1. The Garden Colony

Anton Winter, the son of a violinmaker, grew up in an enormous garden at a time when people could still be born into a destiny. The garden colony had been established back in the day by the sons of industrialists and herbal doctors, by thin-lipped ascetics and a few scholars, by farmers and rangy women in straw hats, when the state was dissolved and the city so desolate and its inhabitants at such a loss that they had to go out into nature to revive. The ladies perched amongst the rhubarb and strawberries and the gentlemen leaned out of the windows of the house to pick fruit from the trees. The children ran around naked all over the property, which belonged to everybody. Supper was eaten outdoors in bare feet. If, at the beginning, it had been a single idea that connected a collection of people as different as night and day, later on it was the plenitude of ideas swarming around the original one that divided the group: while some condemned progress, others despised stagnation.

When Anton Winter was born, that original community had long since unravelled and shrunk into a confusing extended family created by liaisons of the past and loyal to the garden. The odd field or two were still cultivated, the herb garden and orchard tended, but many of them now worked in the city by the sea, so distant to the children. Those who could not get by on the land made the hour's journey everyday, the mountains growing small behind them, the meadows giving way to a network of roads and the uneven ground yielding to restless water. That hour's journey connected two worlds so different to one another that in the garden there was no talk of the town, and in the town no talk

of the garden, as though that would be somehow improper. The two places existed like parallel universes, one in which there was nothing but the earth and the mountains as reflected in the sharply etched features of the inhabitants, and another where the tides washed away those angles and wrinkles. Anton and the other children were kept far away from the sea and the city as if a glimpse could spoil them. And so they stayed back in the garden with the old folk and had all the time in the world.

Depending on the time of day twenty to thirty people were based in the vast main house and the two adjoining buildings. Surrounded by meadows, fields and forest, far from the roads, distanced from neighbours, so far that they were out of sight, nestled in a whimsical garden, which merged into the countryside beyond. Already seasoned when Anton was a child, half farmyard, half country estate, ivy-clad crumbling yellow façade and the wooden veranda, the tall gate, the barrel vaults and the hipped roof, the main building seemed curiously timeless, and the life stories of its inhabitants could be read from its walls and its grounds, layer after layer. Everything lived, constantly shape shifting, came, went, put down roots and disappeared in this beehive. There was an unflagging movement onwards in the rhythms of the coming and going of its inhabitants and inscribed in the chaos of the house. The garden seemed like an allegory, for good or evil, and full of secrets; the old folk sat beneath the magnolias and the children held their ears to the trumpets of the lilies and listened as if to a gramophone calling them to grand adventures. Everything grew and died side by side in this garden in which the humans moved their chairs with the sun like the plants, first holding their faces to the light, later hanging their heads tiredly when darkness fell.

For Anton Winter childhood was filled to the brim with high grass and tea roses and green apples in the trees ogled with such desire through the summer that they eventually blushed shyly. The old ones and the sick stayed at home and the sunlight fell on their thin skin right through to the bone as they sat between the campanula, so delicate, as if they were one of them. With memory of birth in the marrow, death was not feared. The world showed off in all her glory and the skies raced above those small heads, intimately known. The flowers on the lilac bushes burst open overnight in their thousands, almost audible, a crackle round

the garden. The children perched in the magnolia trees without a concern in the world and thus everything belonged to them. Like birds in the branches they sang for their great-aunts and –uncles and for the babies and toddlers, who were laid down in the meadow next to the old ones in the shade of the forest's edge. On haircut days they knelt on a chair howling, watching the hair, cut by their mother wielding a gleaming pairs of scissors, as it fell to the ground while the others stood around, laughing. There was room for everything in that garden. Nothing was impossible back then. The sky was as far away as the moon. The aunts, in hats as wide as wagon wheels, sat next to the bee house, sipping hot tea in the sun. The women's cheeks were as soft as church loaves and when they smiled little lakes formed in them. The white nightshirts and burial gowns were blown on the washing line, and the children slipped into the puffed-up garments from below and pretended to be ghosts. When someone died, they gathered together outside and looked up at the stars and it was as if those left behind were staring through the crack of death and tracing the deceased's path into the universe. Holding an ear to the ground they would try to hear the departed one, and shivered. Nothing smelled as alive as the loose earth on a burial mound at the garden's edge, which they ran over barefoot in the summertime.

Raspberries grew on the burial mounds, and these they stuffed into their maws as though to grow bigger, and those who were already bigger carried great-grandmother home in the evenings, effortlessly as if she were a piece of wood. If anyone overdid the horsing around, eyes glazed over and a high temperature kept them in bed while outside the others played wildly on beyond the window. The children dashed about for days on end, and no one worried. What could go wrong out there in the world anyway? There was an unspoken agreement. Beyond the windows the world began, and behind the fence destiny waited. The young ones anticipated their hoped-for paths with some urgency, and the old ones followed the end of their chosen paths in humility. The children were straw children when they went running over the meadows, and foetuses curled asleep in the trees with wooden crowns as though brought up by the forest, resting in the boughs after penetrating the forest's depths. When it got late there was hot ring cake at home to warm up hands chilled by the day, and soft music issued from the corners. The old ones cradled the violins on their lap

as if they were children, playing them from time to time on the veranda, bundled up in blankets, tumblers filled with apple juice and plates of bread and butter by their benches. Everyone strained towards evening. The mothers rocked their infants in time, and laughing fathers threw them up in the air. The grownups drove back from the city and the children came running from every direction. The farm dogs capered around the home-comers, licking the blood from their grazed knees. Out in the garden they all recounted their wanderings and the happenings of the day and grew gentle around the serenity of their grandparents, who had been avid for their exuberance, until a general peace descended. Then even the scolding birds in the trees grew still and slept like fruits with their heads in their feathers while the flowers slowly closed and night turned the garden damp and dark.

The house always thrummed with bedtime stories for the little ones, filled, too, with a thousand footsteps and the sour smell that rose from the vinegary linen cloths used to bandage the painful legs of the sick. The bridled rocking horses raced through the night and were friends as beloved as the dogs, who scampered round the children's legs. Hold an ear to the chest of a sleeping pet and the cat's heart sounded like the beats of a drum. The women took off their rings and earrings with their pale hands and placed them on bedside tables. There was one last spin of the magic lantern to send the children into their dreams with images of the leaping horses. Leaning over the bed, a hand stroked away the furrows on the old ones' faces, and the brothers Anton and Leander had the books beneath the covers firmly shut with a smile. Years later Anton believed he still remembered his mother's scent of an angel when she perched next to him at night to give him a kiss. And he remembered the shadow that fell across his face just before lips touched him. Then there was only the children's light placed by their parents to ward off the transformed landscape of night, just that tiny lamp in the boys' room, the shadows cast by the flickering candles and the grownups' voices drifting in from the veranda. They lay, their heads of soft curls, listening to the strange noises and gazing at the paltry cone of light until their eyes closed. It was always warm in bed. They slept like the dead and the nights were so long. How they relished them for all they feared the dark. In the morning, waking up was like growing. It seemed to the children that they had

been in an incubator overnight and put on a spurt of growth and now had to grow into the world and stretch their limbs as though their bodies were opening at first light like flowers tight-shut. […]

2. The Town

Anton Winter was an aviarist, although perhaps he should have been a poet or gravedigger considering the childhood he had left behind. One by one relatives, playmates, companions had dropped off along the path taken, not only old people, also school-friends and those so young he could have sworn they had a long life ahead of them. Death followed him on tiptoe. It was as if death coveted everyone close to him. The bone-man departed from each body as a skeleton, freed himself as a faint transfer and ran raggedly through the country, stepping into graves in cemeteries, turning into the sandman and left them sleeping the sleep that had no dreams. And he, Anton, had watch this run of events calmly, first as a child, then as a grown man, never sick himself, always curiously healthy, always astonished, always mute.

Now rather than sleeping he was standing silently by the window again like thousands of others in the city, obscured by darkness, staring at one another through the dark panes. From the top floor of the high-rise where he lived, the twenty-first, he had a better view than anyone as he looked out into the night. It was the tallest building in the city and in the daylight he could make out the sea in the distance. His apartment was a cube resting aloft the building, its wrap-round terrace forming the entire building's roof. Floor to ceiling glass rather than masonry made it a transparent dice, casting a glow visible from some way off as Anton left the lights and lamps burning. In the centre of his sitting room were a sofa and a piano, and birdcages were suspended from the ceiling. There was a profusion of his bird-enclosures on the terrace; he lived above the rooftops in the middle of an aviary. Beneath him the city sprawled alert, although the streets were deserted and still for the moment. Only the cats were running along the roof edges , tails ramrod straight, catching the electricity of the lines dangling between the buildings, stepping with the eyes of beautiful women into the light of flickering streetlamps and out of sight again. From the water the muffled sirens of cargo ships penetrated from time to time. The wind was an electric net spreading itself over the rows of houses and when it was stormy it threw salt crust at the windows, setting this pane of glass trembling, howling round that corner. Night after night Anton looked out from the top floor of the high-rise, into

the windows of the lower concrete blocks. Observed as lights went on. Watched an elderly woman with deft hand movements combing back the sparse greasy hair of her husband who was staring at the wall helplessly; and a lady in smart attire and backcombed hair holding a dried-out bouquet still in cellophane in front of her, carrying it ceremoniously through the apartment; a bald man frying silver fish in a pan; a small boy reverently tying the laces of a seated adult; two chess players sitting opposite each other in a laconic clinch; an elegant lady unable to locate her brushes nervously grooming her fur coat with a fork; the girl next door hanging herself on the cable of her telephone , the receiver swinging like a pendulum. All this he observed attentively but with no surprise. He watched them at close range through binoculars so that they, unaware that they were being observed, were close enough to touch, the gestures and secret lives of those believing themselves alone. Occasionally he lowered his field glasses embarrassed and touched by the carefree intimacy of what he was witness to. The vulnerability shamed him, the loneliness, the crying, the peculiar ways bodies were treated, faces tugged, the twitching, stretching, scratching. Windows lit up randomly and flocks of escapee canaries settled on the cars, claws scrabbling on the bodywork, singing hoarsely, performing their stilted walk on the tin roofs. The fish markets hawked only bones and the scales from the dead animals in the harbour. On every street-corner praying people rocked back and forth, nodding off over their rosaries and prayer beads and the clicking of glass-beads that ran through their fingers like sand. The churches, too, were full day and night with crowds of people who, crazy with fear, begged for mercy as the bells rang out. While some kept up an indefatigable cry to God, others did not believe in anything any more, knew only doubt. Everybody, however, thought constantly about what was inevitable, gathered arguments for and against, which they mulled over in their silent quarters or debated with friends, acquaintances and relatives from whom they had taken their leave so often in recent weeks only to bump into each other again that farewells had grown absurd. There was laughter. There was crying. There was praying. There was swearing. But beneath the curses there was silence and the helplessness of man.

It was different for the children. For the children the new circumstances were a blessing. What care had they for the morrow? They made the city their

own. With acute joy, excitement almost, Anton watched it through his field glasses. Sometimes he found himself breaking into spontaneous applause. Traffic had largely ground to a halt and it was safe enough to play in the streets. And so the children played at war, taking over section after section of the city, the place they had always been warned about, breathed in the cold earth when they fell and listened to the ground, raced over the asphalt and clambered up the street signs. They ran and ran, spread out and returned to their anxious parents, took the neighbourhood over with their miniature war and shot at each other with water pistols, pulled globes free of their supports, and played ball with their spheres of the world, rolling them over the tarmac and sending the countries and continents spinning down the pavements. Anton watched the hordes of playing children and was reminded of something, quite what he could not say, however much he chased the memory, awake at night until he fell into exhausted dreams. […]

3. The Woman

Anton Winter stood still, waiting for his breath to settle. He looked up the height of the building to his terrace until he grew dizzy from vertigo and felt he was no longer looking up, but rather down. The loneliness of the days and the relentless crowing of the cocks had driven him down the fire escape onto the street. Weeks ago the elevator had jammed between the ninth and tenth floors and the dark staircase unnerved him so he preferred taking the exterior route. He wanted to go to the sea. That is what people did when they were sad, went to the sea. The birds had followed him with their eyes, heads cocked, stretched their long necks out after him as though reproaching him for leaving them

It was an icy cold summer day, and it was already late. The sky was grey with clouds that the sea-wind clumped together into a blanket that only thinned when a particularly strong gust of wind tore into it. The wind goose-bumped the skin and tossed the gulls from the sea; caught in its blast, eyes dried out and hair grew sticky. It was the freezing cold that touched the marrow so there were only a couple of dirty-looking figures around, draped in old Santa coats, playing chess with pale hands in the caprices of the last rays of sun and shadow. They were sitting on wooden crates and rolled up rope. Beside them was an upended shopping cart. They looked like ghosts when they greeted him. Absent and distant. By their feet children were playing wrestling games with the defeated chess pieces, held tight in their hands. How they laughed at one moment. And how violently the pieces clashed the next. So it still existed: the same old suffering, the same old happiness. It had been a long time since Anton had left his viewing platform and he was surprised by the number of children out playing whom he usually saw as tiny specks through his binoculars from up above. They played day and night and nobody forbid them to, for there was nothing else for them to do, least of all grow up.

Wherever he looked, as well as children, animals moved between the rows of house. He was startled by the packs of street-dogs with their bloody teeth and sad eyes loping through the twilight and looking back occasionally as though they had forgotten something. He watched the harbour cats and rats

disappearing between the open doors of abandoned buildings and the released circus animals, cowering in the shadows of the façades. They were thin and jumpy. They moved in a procession through the city as if embarking on a long journey. The skin of the elephants was as ashen as human skin. They stood in the gateways to courtyards like phantoms, and troupes of skinny monkeys hung off the washing-lines. Anton discovered a giraffe by the wall of a building, leaning its bony neck against the plaster like a ladder, its backbone rising out of its wasting body as high as the first windows. The city smelled strange, sour and organic, smoky from the fires that were lit at first dusk in the streets and along the pier. The wind bowled the smells along. Anton stepped over chalk drawings on the road and exploded glass. He walked on and on, looked up at the birds overhead, flying over the street, and smiled when he saw a particularly fine specimen in the onset of darkness. It was a long time since he had experienced such excitement at leaving the house. A long time since he had seen so much. The world had stood still for so long and now it was a whirling carousel, pitching through a cataclysmic universe.

Anton followed the slip-tracks down to the landing stage and looked out over the expanse of water, at the industrial harbour with its abandoned dockyards, and behind those the pier still sheltering sailing boats only a few months back, where people liked to stroll with their ice cream cones. The grass, grown tall, scratched under his trouser legs and the wind caught his hair. Here and there goods and passenger trains barred his path. Music reverberated from the railway carriages, droned in his ears and was borne away on a breeze. At the railway concourse children waved over at him with their puny arms, while others shot at cans and bottles lined up along the concourse walls with long-barrelled firearms. Anton waved back, and stood still to give his legs a rest, smoke a cigarette and watch the marksmen. A group of girls sat cross-legged on a ramp and did not pay the least attention to the bottles exploding in front of them. He would have liked to know where they came from, these girls, the children and the weapons they were firing, when there was no one to buy them. He studied the backs of the children and the barrels of the guns, trembling like compass needles before they found their target. He could hear the click of the catch as it was flicked open and the noise as it snapped back into place, the new cartridges

loaded. He watched for the jerk in the marksmen's bodies, holding their breath before firing. He compared the stillness before with the stillness afterwards, the first when the weapon was held in tight against the chest, the other when it was lowered again. He watched the bullets coursing through the cans, making them vibrate, and then the light poking through the holes in the aluminium tin.

A sated dusk had fallen by the time Anton reached the sea's edge. The air was moist with spindrift making the pebbles slippery underfoot. He shivered. The harbour promenade was covered in fish-scales that gleamed in the dying light and with bodies strewn about this quicksilver glimmering. On the radio they urged in vain that people not partake in the mass suicides occurring every Saturday in the middle of the park, on the outskirts of the city or by the harbour. Anton had frequently seen people behind their windows caressing their possessions, waking out of the stupor of the day, agitatedly pulling on a hat, slipping out of the door and, as if by chance, joining a crowd on the street with the same destination. They shot each other, into the heart or skull, with weapons bought from the station concourses. The children demonstrated how to load and fire them. The children laughed and practised. The grownups killed. From the loudspeakers, *Live and Let Die* thundered out across the execution fields, mingling with the tones of the wedding marches, the soundtrack to which people married, those who had chosen love, as it were, over death. No one knew which was the better choice. And so it happened that the guests at the mass suicides celebrated check by jowl with the guests of the mass weddings. When the ceremonies were over, spouses walked back to their flats hand in hand while the dead decayed on the schnapps-bottle-strewn meadows, until the animals dragged them off or someone took pity and either burned or buried the bodies. No one took the trouble of erecting crosses for the suicide victims.

Here at the harbour it was sea-faring folk and entire marine choirs who took their own lives, war brides with scarred faces and sailors as well as officers in uniform with the broad shoulders of a bygone age, men and women. They tumbled like stones down the wave breakers when they died. They sank with their leaden hearts, lay bloated and gelatinous on the seabed with their rusting service medals, disfigured bodies next to immaculate fish who flitted through the shallow water. Others piled up, limbs stretched out, on the pier, and the wind

tugged at their hair. The seagulls wheeled and screeched above them and the whipped-up sea. The faces of the dead had long since become mildewed, and crustaceans crawled out from between their lips and contemplated the ocean. There was a smell of fish and flesh. Clammy fingers were notched where wedding rings had once sat, and rosaries pressed against the heart had tumbled into the chest cavity and appeared as trinkets pressed into dissolving skin. It was a graveyard minus the graves. Anton Winter knelt down by the dead. Not since leaving the garden had he been so close to them, as though he had left dying behind. He could not resist touching them. They were peaceful and cold as they had been then. Malleable after the rigor mortis, and heavy. With deep folds on the head and long nails on the fingers where the yellowed skin had already receded, blotches like birthmarks on the twisted arms and pressed in noses if they had been lying on their fronts. He did not know what he was looking for. He gazed into their faces as one might gaze into a crowd hoping to pick out a friend, but he did not discover anyone he knew. And so he sat by the harbour for a long time, throwing stones that silently plummeted down to the dead.

When he looked up he saw someone coming towards him through the crepuscular light. A woman of such slight build it seemed she had been returned to her girlhood stature, walking along the harbour wall and looking out to sea. She was wearing an apron that the wind was whipping up as she clambered from stone to stone. She kept looking over from there to the field of corpses, looking into the faces of sailors, admirals, and generals, who were lying in unseemly, monstrous display in the harbour, as if she had known them. Even at that distance, Anton could tell she was crying. The woman bent down over one corpse then another on the promenade, then she paused on the brink of the pier and look down into the water. When she noticed Anton she did not hesitate for a moment. Even before apparently knowing why, she was off at a run. Perhaps she was afraid that he too could put a bullet in his brain. Her gestures were those of a person who would come to the aid of another to find her own salvation.

A mere matter of weeks before the world would cease to exist, Anton Winter fell deeply in love for the first time in his forty-two years. She was an almost

translucent woman, a woman as scrawny as he was, with a straight back and reddened eyes that fixed on him ready-for-battle.