

Excerpt from

THIS WAY, FOREVER

by

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(Cosí per sempre, Einaudi , 2022)

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“I don’t want to learn anything from the failure of this love.”
Susan Sontag

I.

NEITHER VENUS NOR MARS DAY.
WHERE GIACOMO KOCH, THE PROTAGONIST OF THIS NOVEL,
RECEIVES AN UNEXPECTED VISIT FROM HIS GREAT LOVE.
ROME, LARGO DI TORRE ARGENTINA.

A human being weighs about five and a half pounds of ash. To know the rest takes a long time. And a friend. He had time, but he missed Carl.

If you have a whole spool available, you don't have to guess the length of the thread or assume it. Dreams are cuts or splices, my friend, immortal beings, if they exist – Carl had smiled behind his small, round gold-rimmed glasses –, do not dream. Those who have all the time in the world measure it.

Giacomo Koch – that is the name of the Count at present when the story begins – had never mourned the lack of dreams, but he was sorry, now, not to be able to dream about Carl and talk with him. So that morning Giacomo felt nostalgic, something that had never happened to him, whose possibility of ever happening Carl had ruled out.

After a hundred and twenty years in the old Europe, he had become accustomed to human beings' need to feel reciprocated, and the fact that Carl could not come to him in his imagination, fantasy or dream, hung over him like a cloud. Yes, on that morning of approaching spring, Dracula was regretful.

He had memories, but dreams were something different. He had learned that from reading and listening. Dreams are the release of memories, an acceleration of the decomposition that he knew all about, and which is not just that of the flesh.

There is volition at the center of dreams, not desire.

A dreamed version of Carl would be different from Carl's memory, would express other hypotheses and other theories, would change, and as long as things change, both time and living beings exist.

Giacomo was aware that nostalgia and melancholy, like almost all human emotions, are states of mind. And being states of mind, they are places, and being places, one can reach them, or try to reach them. Therefore, to sort out the particular melancholy of that March morning he would take a train to Milan, change for Zurich and from there to Küsnacht, where, placing his hand on Carl's gravestone, he would leave a flower, or a thought. Better off going with flowers. Both for him and for human mortals, the earth spelled certainty. Man must go below, Carl Jung had said, We will all go there, Giacomo had answered him on a morning in 1959.

Reassured by plans for the trip, Giacomo telephoned Federica, his colleague at Fatebenefratelli. I'm taking a couple of days off, I'm going to visit a friend. But if she felt the work would be too much, he would postpone. No no, go, you're the boss after all, why are you letting me know? It's not as if we can predict beforehand how many people will need a final examination by a specialist. Giacomo's lips formed a smile as he

looked toward Isola Tiberina, the Tiber island where the hospital and Federica were, to get a better look at her.

As she talked on the phone, Federica's index finger was scrolling through the photographs posted on the Instagram account of a certain Vito Parenti. She was smiling, so Giacomo thought she must have fallen in love again. Maybe not in love, infatuated. Under the lab coat, behind the button of her jeans, his gaze saw through to the skin, and under the skin to the strange flowerpot or ram's horns that is the reproductive system; there Giacomo found no trace of seminal fluid or signs of recent intercourse, he only knew that she would ovulate from the left ovary, and that there was no need to worry about that fibroid that was less than an inch long. She would have to monitor it for another twenty years or so, then, once her periods stopped, and the fertility game was over, she could forget about it. With his eyes on the uterine cervix, Giacomo wondered when and if Federica would have a baby.

Are you still there?, she asked, and Giacomo sighed Yes. Then I'll see you next week. But where are you going? To Switzerland. I've never been there. There's nothing to see. Except your friend. Except some friends. Some, oh really!

Then Federica said Excuse me, I have to go, my bladder is about to burst. Giacomo followed her as she squeezed her legs together, hopping around, and turned her back on the old telephone in the old hospital morgue in the very old city dissected by the eternal river, before running to the bathroom.

Without her body, the room lost its warmth and vividness. Giacomo saw it somewhat faded, but he was still able to see it thanks to the woman and the man in the adjoining rooms. In the course of that loss of definition, like a breath growing faint, the display on Federica's cell phone also went dark. Giacomo, with that remote but prehensile vision of his, swept the screen to browse through Vito Parenti's public diary.

A good-looking young man, dark-haired and smiling, who liked the sea, and who seemed to have led, and to lead, a quiet life. Scrolling through, Giacomo lingered on a photo with a dog, a medium-sized, reddish mutt, on one of the boy's parents, perhaps a wedding anniversary judging by the succinct caption, and on the picture of a young brunette who resembled him, with only a red heart for comment, nothing more, probably his sister. She looked sad. Almost all the photos were taken in Milan. Okay, she likes a Milanese who loves the sea. Sensing Federica's quick footsteps returning, Giacomo closed his eyes, and as usual, everything went dark.

What good are dreams to me, he would have liked to admit to Carl, when human mortals, in their ordinary lives, are my dreams, my scraps of thread, remnants to knot and patch together, mirrors in which to see myself. Living mortals.

Reopening his eyes he found himself on his terrace, in front of the facade of Teatro Argentina, with its dedication to the muses, the jumbled frieze of instruments and masks, the triumphant sculpture at the top, and the ruins below. No surprise, he had been living in that apartment since the 1940s; he had chosen it for the view of the circular temple dedicated to the Goddess Fortuna, or rather to the Fortuna of the present day. Her temple, all in the present, all the present, forever the present, forever present.

In the center of what remained of the base lay the cats, lords of the sacred area, some reclining on their sides like tigers, paws outstretched and tails straight back, others roosting like hens, drowsing. Among them, with his black coat and two gold rings on his forepaws, sat Zibetto, his red eyes staring upward. The cat yawned, showing very long

canines and a reptilian palate. Those teeth, the first time, had frightened him. Zibetto was distracted from yawning and from watching Giacomo, in order to follow the acrobatics of three puppies – one gray, one black white and red, one black – who were chasing one another, romping and frolicking about. Still new to the uneven levels among the large paving stones, Cyclopean stones and sanpietrini, they were attempting to leap over them, moving diagonally.

Giacomo called the name Zibetto and the cat, unhurriedly, after tilting his head back to lick a paw, cast another glance around and started meandering home. It seemed as if the ground, stones or grass, marble or asphalt, was transformed into a springy carpet upon contact with his paws.

Zibetto first jumped onto the scape of a column, then onto a Cyclopean masonry wall, and finally, stepping out of the excavation hollow, landed on the sidewalk.

The piazza was quiet: two women waited for the bus in front of the theater, a man slept huddled under the tower, and the fabric store, the Azienda Tessile Romana, had not yet raised its shutters. The two women seemed to be going to the station. The number 40 or the 64?, Giacomo wondered, straining his ears. When is the 30 coming?, the blonde griped instead to the brunette, her voice nasal with a bad cold.

He laughed. All the present, but no future; the 30 was going to EUR.

Giacomo lived in the corner building. Pompeian red – tennis red Mina had called it a few decades earlier. Tennis red, red. The ashlar base of diamond-shaped, outward-facing stone rose to the second floor. The slightly projecting, weather-worn but intact cornice moldings extended along the perimeter of the building. He had chosen the place for Zibetto, who had a habit, one he had always had, even in London, of climbing up the facade to come home. On that rusticated surface, it would have seemed acrobatic but not impossible for a cat to walk vertically. But how many would be curious enough to look up and crane their necks? Human beings were not inquisitive enough to train their eyes on the sky, or lower them to the underworld. They focused vainly on things at their own height, or just above. Not all of them, but after centuries of observation and habitual association, Dracula did not abstain from generalizations.

Zibetto meanwhile climbed slowly, unconcerned about the force of gravity, pausing now and then to stretch, puff up his tail and hiss at a sparrow, or at the pigeons he hated and feared. Since the number and size of seagulls had increased, Giacomo was afraid that one of the huge sea birds might injure him, thinking he was prey; but in more than a hundred years no harm had come to his cat, either from humans or from birds. On the contrary, the owners of the fabric store, with extreme politeness, would deferentially offer him food. Zibetto, weaving the sinuous coils of his paws, tail, and head around their ankles, would clamp the food between his teeth and carry it off to the excavation site, to benefit other cats with a more varied diet than his own.

The cat stopped just over the railing and began licking his paw and running it over his head, from ears to nose, ears to nose, ears to nose, with a gesture that entranced Giacomo.

Dream interpretation is a much older practice than psychoanalysis. It had already existed at the time the Count was born. His father had had an oneiromancer and his wife Elisabeta as well. He had been jealous. Since her death, he had never dreamed of her. Six dark centuries. He had thought he would never see her again, but he was wrong. He

had found her again, betrothed to young Harker – who had come to Transylvania to sell him a house; he had thought she'd come back. Likewise he had not cared about the oneiromancer's missing dreams in that November 1897 and about jealousy, but he was wrong again. Mina was not Elisabeta. Mina was Mina.

Having completed his ablutions, Zibetto rubbed against his legs. Hearing the grumbling purr, Giacomo went to the kitchen and opened the refrigerator. The greenish glow projected a shaft of light on the floor that bathed his feet and legs up to his calves; in the center of it, Zibetto, nose in the air and ears pointed, waited for his food. His red eyes, in the green light, gleamed yellow.

What are you trying to warn me about, cat?

Giacomo reached out and took a pouch from the apparatus that rumbled like a Victorian coal-fired contraption, tubes going in and out, valves, pistons, bellows. Zibetto's now deep yellow, almost gold, eyes shone as brightly as the rings on his paws. Okay, here you are. He ripped open the pouch with his pinkie nail that he used as a jack-knife and poured the blood into a funnel that dripped into the bowl. The prophecy in the cat's eyes was gone – predictions tend to do that – he was just a cat eating.

Carl had never wanted to hypnotize him, Useless, he repeated, you're timeless. With a serene face, but in a tone that says You're hopeless.

To be timeless but have memory.

From the open refrigerator he took out two more bags of blood, bit and sucked them looking up at the ceiling. On the terraced roof, two seagulls were fighting over the crust of a pizza. Pizza bianca.

It was a beautiful sunny day, he would take the elevator down, walk to Termini station, and travel comfortably in a high-speed train, not a silent carriage. In Milan he would rent a car for the lake. He had never liked lakes. Standing water either. If there's a lake in a city you end up looking only at that. Rivers flow, lakes stand.

The corpses that came by on the table of his operating room at Fatebenefratelli lay supine, blue-white on top, purple and yellow underneath. Green at times. Lakes of pooled blood that, without the vigor of the heart, yield to gravity. Mortal life is counter to nature; human beings walk upright and have a circulatory system that while obeying gravity does not submit to it; they construct houses that are their progeny and that, once more, defy gravity.

Having come to the West to stay there, he had thought that he himself was counter to nature; he could not expose himself to sunlight, face up to crosses, or go near the smell of garlic, issues that the very encounter with the West had posed for him. He had believed Jonathan Harker, the real estate developer, and Van Helsing, the vampire slayer, he had believed Renfield, the visionary madman. The hate and love that had greeted him in the West were not abstract feelings, but human beings. There is no such thing as feelings, there are people.

It was Carl who had led him to accept the need not only of the living but of their customs. Having no limits of time, my friend, you imposed those of space; not experiencing the passage of time, you found a way to mark day and night, inside and outside, before and after. You invented your lacunas, my friend, Carl had said, emptying the bowl of the pipe that Giacomo had never seen him fill. The Count knew that he was no more nor less contrary to nature than human beings. He was an improbable form of the already quite improbable thing that is human life. He was an intermittent form of

human life. When blood coursed through his body he had all the vulnerabilities and blips of human mortals, then as the blood gradually disappeared he took on the strength and invincibility of plants and minerals. Like nature, he contained all the kingdoms within him.

Nevertheless, after centuries of human beings, that morning Dracula felt nostalgic and supposed that sooner or later, in perhaps another century, he would dream. Besides, he tended to form friendships, he worried about Federica, and he fed Zibetto because he would never want to see the cat's supple body impaled on a wooden spike by superstition. Or decapitated. That was what he wanted to talk about with Carl, who had been able to see more deeply and much sooner. The years, the centuries, the afternoons were moving toward him. Time moves ahead. It comes. He would touch Carl's gravestone and talk to him.

Zibetto drank the blood of whatever he had available, lacking that he could subsist on the lymph in plants and on running water; whatever flows is nourishing, even when it flows mechanically, even when the flow is simulated or fake. Such is life, it proceeds by deceptions, and they call them mirror neurons. Zibetto, however, like himself, preferred human blood.

He had always made him find plenty of it, one is responsible for what one rescues. Human beings, on the other hand, say 'go to hell' so they can remain carefree.

Giacomo had learned much more about human mortals than they had learned about him. Because they thought he was dead, and because it's those who want to understand that learn, not those who want to destroy.

Only on one night had he failed to feed Zibetto. October 16, 1943.

Giacomo had stood hunched, leaning out like a gargoyle over the roofs of the buildings on Via Catalana, watching the raid on Rome's ghetto: the most brutal recurrence of the eternal manhunt, era after era, predator and prey. That night Zibetto had stumbled upon a dazed and battered old woman, had bitten her ankle and had drunk her blood, killing her. When Giacomo had returned to the house and found him satiated and content, curled up like an ammonite in the armchair, he had made him lead him to where he had eaten. The cat, ears and tail drooping, had steered him among the temple ruins and grimy, rusty scaffolding. The rings on Zibetto's paws gleamed in the moonlight. Mina's laughter, which others might have mistaken for the cry of a nocturnal raptor, rose from Via Giulia where some Nazi officers who were friends of hers were stationed, but he tried to ignore it. The old woman was dead. Giacomo had buried her so that no one, finding her, would discover the two jagged holes on her right ankle. He had covered her with huge stones, lifting them carefully and silently.

So today, after more than half a century, peering at the base of the Temple of Fortuna and the huge paving stones, though he could not see distinctly through the stones, he perceived the old woman's skull thanks to roots, laden with lymph from the incipient spring, which extended his vision beyond the mineral and inorganic life of stone and bones. He saw the skull like a spider's web. A Flemish still life with cracked paint. If the old woman had still been alive that night, would he have saved her? Would he have made her drink his blood, giving her the gift of eternity? Another mouth to feed.

Zibetto satisfied himself out of need, Zibetto did not spread disease, Zibetto knew without having been taught that he was an expression of nature. Over the years Giacomo had understood that the cat had come to him to show him how to behave. And as he

smiled at the stones and the intuition of those human remains, as he thought back to Mina's laughter, almost a counterpoint to a melody by Wagner, the doorbell trilled and Giacomo, as always, knew with certainty that it was her outside the door, that it was not Elisabeta, and would not become her.

Zibetto made that guttural sound that signals fear and warns of a scuffle. Behind the armor-plated wooden door, both he and the cat heard her muttering at first, then laughing ominously. Giacomo was unable to see her; he glimpsed another woman instead. He could not forget anything, her laughter most of all. Always present, all the present. The sea gulls on the terraced roof had flown up in flight, frightened, screeching, pecking at one another, streaming in formation. The pizza had been abandoned.

The moment he took the first step toward the door, his back to the terrace, just before he smelled the scent of tuberose mixed with damp earth and rotting leaves that he would always recognize – and that, he was sure, would be the last perceptible thing at the end of time –, Giacomo sensed her open hand paw his back like a hoof.

Zibetto, Giacomo smiled bitterly, she has all your bad habits.

Your feelings, Mina said, or your intentions, yours, toward me, are no longer what they were, your feelings, my love, love.

Giacomo had learned over the lustrums, especially since living there permanently, that in Italy the past almost never manifests itself as a ghost. It returns in linguistic form. In proverbs, in idioms, in distorted words, in dialectical breaches that restrain dominations and battles, annexations and geographies. Thus, at the touch of those beloved and feared, familiar and unpredictable hands, which he had sucked and bitten and kissed and longed for one at a time, and together, motionless or enquiring, he had remembered that no, *Né di Venere né di Marte, non si sposa non si parte, né si dà principio all'arte*, never get married or depart on Mars or Venus day, or start a new venture. This was not the day to go to confession in front of Carl Jung's grave.

2.

WHERE IT BECOMES CLEAR THAT WHAT BEGINS WITH BLOOD,
FEEDS ON BLOOD AND ENDS IN BLOOD.
AND WHERE THE COUNT'S GREAT LOVE
HAS HERSELF A GREAT LOVE.
ROMA, LARGO DI TORRE ARGENTINA.

Mina Monroy – named Mina Harker, née Murray, today as the story begins – had on an Indian-print jacket in shades of green and blue, patterned with budgies and flowers, ankle-length trousers that did not cover the anklebones, and a pair of yellow furlanes, the color of a budgie's beak. Her long fingernails instead were cobalt blue. Her wavy white hair, worn loose, fell below her ears. Her eyes were the familiar petrol color – a strange, opaque brown, streaked with dark blue and bronze – and she wore the usual yellow gold ring with a single stone on her little finger, and an anklet that he had never seen on her. The wrinkles around her mouth gave depth to her lips, emphasizing them as is the case with men who sport beards; those around her eyes fanned out, accompanied by thin emerald veins, like a peacock's tail, which they resembled. The peacock brings bad luck.

Giacomo moved a few steps away and wanted to say something, but instead he stared at the floor below which Renato Campi was brushing his teeth as he did every morning before going out. Both Renato Campi and he were barefoot, and that, with Mina standing there, made him feel out of sorts. He had always felt out of sorts ever since meeting her in London, on the street. It was after seeing her in a photograph that Jonathan Harker carried with him in his wallet, on that trip to Transylvania that seemed to be the first of many fruitful business trips, and instead would be the last.

Having desired her, continuing to desire her in spite of everything, made him feel out of sorts. We are what is external to us and what we want, he learned, again, watching her. He learned it all over again each time. On that point he was memoryless. She weakened him. He hated to feel weak and knew he was vulnerable because he had just eaten.

Mina went past him, walked to the door and opened it.

A woman with aquamarine eyes, soft, light-colored pants, a lacquer-red oriental-style jacket, and a long, off-white scarf entered the room. I'm Agnese, good morning. Giacomo looked at her, and through the turtleneck sweater he saw the skin and underneath the skin the muscles of her neck, and, lower still, the flowing blood. She was perhaps eighty years old, but didn't look her age. Good morning, Giacomo replied, still barefoot; he stepped back, so that the invitation to sit down would be more credible. Agnese's smile was not an even one, but thin, lopsided, and asymmetrical, and she had a strange, split, birdlike look. She was thin, with prominent shoulders and platinum hair that must have really been blond. On her little finger she wore a ring that was the twin of

the one worn by Mina. I am not like you, I cannot fly nor live forever, but thank God for the elevator. Mina told me she likes elevators so you will understand my enthusiasm in addition to the need. Giacomo remembered that he had not seen Mina since September 1945, when she still wore her long hair down to the hips, braided and coiled, and looked about twenty-five. The age she was when he had first met her on the street in London, in 1897. Now she looked about seventy.

Agnese, too, has been a doctor all her life, Mina began in her knowing, plaintive, controlling tone, as he listened to her repeat All her life all her life all her life. She's been retired for a few years – she continued as if Agnese were not there, or could not speak for herself, or were already dead – we decided to take a trip, we decided, and in spite of the agreement, it seemed absurd to me to spend a few days in Rome and not stop by to say hello to you, in Rome. I was expecting to see you at the station, to see you, and see you do something grandiose to stop me from getting off the train, grandiose, I know you are passionate about trains, and bagatelles of that kind, you like them, but no, I have to come to your house, bagatelles, to see you, but maybe you're right, but no, I'm harmless.

Mina moved close to him and laid her head on his chest. Feeling the blood flow, she became hungry. Restraining her teeth from clamping, she swallowed. Giacomo kept his arms at his sides and turned toward Agnese, who had been a doctor all her life and was contemplating Mina, neither curious nor dismayed. At that point Giacomo took a closer look.

Agnese's body was an Africa of scars, bites everywhere, some recent, some extremely old, puncture wounds mixed with age spots. Bites on the backs of her hands, on her wrists, thighs, calves, breasts, bites on her neck, behind her ears, under her arms, bites on her iliac crests and pubis. Giacomo did not perceive tenderness or docility in Agnese's eyes, rather a feeling of possessiveness, a foolish power and a desperation that is the consequence, when not the distinctive form, of love. Not infatuation. An amour. Beset with rules and exceptions. A long, passionate relationship, written on the body, that would end the way happy love stories end, when one of them dies.

And Giacomo knew, Mina knew, and Agnese knew too whose turn it would be to die, as Agnese continued to contemplate Mina's head resting on Giacomo's chest; her gaze was the kind one turns on mountains or the sea, a mixture of joy and emotion because you know they were there before you and will be there afterward. Human beings knew this. Giacomo, if he had known it, had forgotten what it felt like to look at a landscape. That was what they were to human beings: landscape – one can love it, not like a person. Like some landscapes they were frightening, like others they were memory, desire and the destination of a journey. A journey that Agnese, as the map of her scars told, had not wanted to make. Giacomo envied her for not having surrendered to the promise of eternity. He saw her eighty-one years coming toward her.

He wanted to know her better, perhaps he wanted to eat her.

She would not let him know her; she hated him. So then.

It was Giacomo's voracity that irritated Mina, who with a leap pounced on the cat, grabbing it by the tail and, indifferent to its cries and claws, slammed it against the wall. Zibetto managed to scratch her ankle before blacking out. The lacerations, dry and white, quickly healed. I've never liked animals, living or dead, I don't eat meat, you know, Agnese said to Giacomo, still with that split bird look and those pale lips. The voice was silvery, youthful, rain bouncing off cobblestones. You could have warned me you were

coming, I would have prepared something for you, Giacomo said with a little bow, In the past you would prepare someone for me, Mina said pointedly.

In the past I loved you.

Agnese stood up abruptly, Zibetto raised his head for a moment, Giacomo found the woman in front of him. Keep your friend in place, Mina, my mercy is not infinite, Your mercy does not exist, Why did you come here?, I want to return to Rome, Why? You liked Venice, I like Venice, but I want to be near you, I like Venice, I'm tired of being alone, tired, You don't live alone, I see, I want you, It's not possible now, Mina, No?, No, go on with your eternal life and I with mine, separately, as we agreed, we made a pact, you swore, I swore, that's it, You want to keep a pact for eternity, you want?, We'll come to an end too, all we do is end, we're just slower than the others.

Agnese at that point pulled a dagger out of her pocket and lunged at him. Mina, leaning against the wall, laughed as her hair turned dark again. Giacomo, not moving, not flinching, grabbed Agnese by the neck and lifted her up. The woman's hands went to Giacomo's fingers to loosen his grip, letting go of the dagger. Giacomo released her, and Agnese, as soon as she was on her feet, grabbed the blade again and stuck it in his neck. Missing the jugular, however. A drop of blood landed on the floor, Agnese slid her foot back and forth over it. A flash of triumph blazed in Mina's eyes, a flicker of relief flared in Giacomo's, while in Agnese's the glimmer of possibility was extinguished. How deceptive light is.

Even Euclid knew that light can get around obstacles, Newton thought it was composed of corpuscles, Huygens, a few decades after Newton, had said no, it was made of waves. To propagate, however, waves need a medium, and so he posited the existence of luminiferous ether. Only an idea, because there was no experiment that revealed its nature. By the mid-nineteenth century, human beings had understood that light is an effect of the electromagnetic field, and that our eyes can see only a very small part of it.

Giacomo, on the other hand, could perceive all of it, decide which part of the spectrum to look at, from the visible to the infrared, all the way to ultraviolet. Thus, when he reached the infrared, he saw Agnes cooling down, because, contrary to what it seemed, she was afraid. You die sooner when you're afraid, he wanted to tell her, instead he merely continued to stare at her. Gastrointestinal slackening, bronchial dilatation, rising heart rate, blood flow diverted to the muscles, liver, myocardium, brain, increased blood sugar. Agnese, like all mammals under attack or in flight, was producing adrenaline, and yet, Giacomo observed, her temperature was dropping. What was Agnese's medical specialty given that she had missed both the jugular vein and the carotid artery? What could Giacomo say about the *substantia nigra* in Agnese's mesencephalon? Staring at her, he was distracted from his diagnosis because he'd remembered the last time they had tried to kill him. It was November 6, 1897.

But his attention quickly turned back to observing the hand that had tried to kill him. He was clutching her wrist and could still perceive fear and desperation. While deciding what to do and whether to do it, Giacomo looked at Mina. She was once again strong, young, beautiful, curvaceous, her hair as black and glossy as Zibetto's coat. Why had she slammed the cat against the wall? The cat was theirs. Why had this stranger tried to stick a blade in his neck while she was a guest in his house? He had grown tired of the stranger, so with his free hand he yanked the dagger out of her fist and plunged it into her chest; then, with his thumbnail, he slit open her throat. Mina's eyes widened, the

budgies on her jacket flew away, as if startled by an explosion. Giacomo knelt down, placed his lips on Agnese's forehead, whispered in her ear, then closed her eyes. Zibetto, approaching the woman's body, began lapping up the viscous fluid dripping from her throat, a slow trickle because her heart had already stopped.

From time to time the cat would pause, look at Giacomo, and lick his left paw, running it over his head from ear to nose. An image of domestic serenity that took him back to long afternoons on the terrace with Zibetto and Ion. For the Count, time was not a stairway but a pool, everything floated in it.

And it was Ion himself, with the timing befitting loyalty, who appeared behind Mina to keep her from leaping forward. She began to laugh, and, slowly but surely, the laughter turned to fury. Why did you want to kill me?, Why don't you love me, why, My feelings for you would not change even with that blade in my throat, Tell your servant to let me go, your servant, He's not my servant, he's my friend, What about me?, about me, The woman I thought I would go through time with.

For Mina, too, time was a pool, so she looked at him and saw him elsewhere, standing in front of Palm House, in a burgundy redingote. She watched herself run to meet him. She kissed him, and he grabbed her by the waist, lifted her off the ground and twirled her around. Twice. Three times, three full spins. Passersby gave them smiling looks, because happiness is infectious, a swift, inescapable infection for which there is no vaccine, no praxis, no remedy and no safe distance.

It was at the time when they went out only at night. It was May and everything all around was rushing by. Electric light didn't hurt them, Ion was a gentle young man, in the countryside around London you could drink growers and farm hands, children especially, without anyone being alarmed by their disappearance, the orphanages were full, in Whitechapel, around Westminster, down in Islington, no one worried about those who didn't come home, no one looked for any of them, hardly ever. The deaths they caused were fewer than those attributable to various diseases and, above all, less frightening than the deaths from scabies, dysentery, scurvy, wounds, bubonic plague, polio, syphilis and numerous shootings or stabbings. Women died with a knitting needle between their legs to get rid of a child who would be one more mouth to feed, or they died giving birth. It was clear, observing that world, that life and death are on a wheel of chance, they go round, pursue one another, and recur over and over.

Mina had even given birth to William, and Jonathan, pleased, boasted to his friends that for his beautiful bride time did not pass. Perhaps, the Count had suggested, without effects men are unable to wonder about causes, and ultimately that means living in human time.

Mina, twirling in the Count's arms far beyond human time, therefore thought that her true love, the man who now held her firmly by the waist, would not be a disappointment, if the Count did not prioritize career, money, home, social status, and self-image, as Jonathan had done. The Count would not give her a mortal child as Jonathan had done. So much fretting only to then return to dust.

Sometimes she felt guilty for having avoided death, at least with Jonathan, only with Jonathan. She had betrayed him, that's why she had asked the Count to let Jonathan's life come to an end rather than leave him. The son, at some point, would accept the fact that she too would die, the son himself would die.

At that point they would be free.

Mina would spend the first hours of the day making the signs of time bloom on her face, and thickening her body, and unable to handle everything herself she had asked the Count if she could take Luisa with her, a lady cannot go into eternity without a maid. And so the Count had done what she was not yet able to do, and Luisa had begun helping her, where nature did not succeed, foam rubber padding and makeup did. They were new and inexperienced to their possibilities and to their eternity. From time to time, Luisa laughingly complained with that annoying whinny of hers, that she wished the chance had come before she grew old, which is worse than dying, that the chance to remain forever the same had come when she was young and not an old woman of fifty, no longer desirable. Fortunately, a hundred years later, fifty years did not spell the end of life. Indeed, by the 1880s, in the West, no one was old anymore. Luisa had men, she had refined her ways, moderated her laughter. Being a maid, after a hundred years, was not the same thing. Everything had changed, except them. What the end of life meant, Mina no longer knew. She did not know even now that Agnese lay at Giacomo's feet, now that she had no idea where Luisa was, and Ion was restraining her, gripping her shoulders. It was strange, Mina thought, not being dependent on breathing yet feeling suffocated.

She could see him still there, standing in the park in front of Palm House, all around him Maytime flowers gleaming in the electric light, hoarfrost dotting the lawn, the last boats brought back to shore, the last visitors walking toward the gates, lovers lingering, children who would be lost, whom no one would ever find again. How many children were buried in London's parks, that's why the flowers were so beautiful, the colors so vivid, the scents so intense. A squirrel stopped running and returned her gaze, then, terrified, scampered away. Animals avoided her. From time to time, when she went home at night she would bring an arm, or a leg, so Luisa could drink. Giacomo had explained to her how to turn dead blood into living blood by making use of gravity and capillary attraction.

Movement fools life.

There were a lot of flies buzzing around the house, but Jonathan was not troubled by them.

Mina wondered, as she tried to free herself from Ion's grip, what had irreparably happened to that man who had twirled her around, who poured blood into four-hundred-year-old crystal goblets for her, who had agreed to her pretending to be mortal until his rival, the man who had tried to kill him and take her away from him, who had had a child with her, had died. That man no longer wanted anything to do with her. She could not believe that he now stood before her, impassive and unreachable, after killing the woman with whom she had spent the last sixty years. With Agnese dead, she could go back to looking twenty-five. What had happened that was so irreparable? If she were able to understand, she could explain, if she knew what was irreparable about something that she must have done, or that he'd thought she had done, everything would go back to the way it was before. Two happy young people twirling to admiring glances in a park. They could go strolling in the sun, visit churches, wear garlands of garlic, fly from continent to continent, feed on the blood of mortals who lived in forests, or on mountaintops, or grew up near the sea, savor human beings and recover the tastes they had given up. But instead, no, they stood facing one another unable to advance or retreat. Let me stay close to you, to you, We made a pledge and we must keep it, Ion, let her go.

Mina wanted to gouge the miserable gypsy's eyes out, but instead she knelt down, chased off Zibetto – who hissed at her, arching his back and bristling his tail –, wrapped Agnese's scarf around her neck, picked her up and, with long strides, went out onto the terrace. Devotion or deposition, Giacomo wondered, watching her.

You've never stopped asking yourself superfluous, frivolous questions, questions, Mina muttered, not turning around.

The black cat didn't want to be with her anymore either, yet she had saved him. She should not have come, she had only lost Agnese. Of course she would have died anyway. If Agnese had killed him, would she have remembered her forever? Had Agnese really believed she could kill Count Dracula? Only human beings could accept, fight and even love lost causes.

She rose into the air.

Stepping out onto the terrace, Giacomo thought that everyone has his muses, and his personal Melpomene was Mina. His muse of tragedy.

Ion, Yes, my lord, Who was this human, I don't know, sir.

Ion, Yes, my lord, When did Mina change?, Never, it was you who believed she had, And therefore?, And therefore, you being the only one to blame, you are the only one who can make amends, it's as in original sin, my lord, you alone are able to cleanse it, But not with water, Ion, with blood, for it is in blood that she reached eternity.

Ion, Yes, my lord, Never stop reminding me how wrong I was, Never, my lord.

Zibetto flicked his head as if to shoo away flies, the irritation in his ear from the blow he had received.

Scholium

WHAT HAPPENED TO THE COUNT ON NOVEMBER 6, 1897, WHO ION IS,
AND HOW, THANKS TO THE GREAT ACTRESS ELLEN
TERRY, DRACULA IS ABLE TO ESCAPE AMBUSH
AND DIVERT EVERYONE FROM MINA'S NEW NATURE.
CARPATHIAN MOUNTAINS, AT SUNDOWN.

They were running. The gypsies whom he had entrusted to transport the last chestful of earth in which to rest were uneasy. Ion, the youngest among them, whipped the horses with the same motion a priest makes sprinkling the parishioners with holy water, but more vigorously. Because Ion had more faith, and because he could measure salvation.

The Count, inside the chest, perceived the snow swirling about, the wagon boards creaking, the cold permeating the wood that separated him from the open air; he sensed Ion and his men sweating, and saw the faces of his pursuers as if they were in front of him, their features distorted by fear and the premonition of victory; he saw Mina, protected, or so the enemies believed, in a ring of fire, and who instead, the night before, while Van Helsing the vampire slayer was trying to rest, had angrily mutilated the bodies of the horses, trisecting herself into what the vain old doctor had at first imagined to be three of the castle's demons, then three nymphs who, unable to have him, had attacked the horses. One always dreams of glory, even when it's irrational to do so. Lying supine and weak in his box of earth, Dracula wondered why that sharp-witted man, Van Helsing, his adversary, had not considered that among a vampire's potentials was the creation of simulacra, and that those simulacra, Golem aggregates of bloodless clay, gave a perfect impression of reality – of what humans recognize as reality. Whatever they can touch and whatever touches them. Van Helsing had fought, drunk and lubricious, against handfuls of dust raised by Mina's breath. Van Helsing had not realized that Mina was in fact a vampire.

The Count could hear the enemies approaching, he perceived their strength, and raised his head slightly looking towards Ion. He wondered if, in the end, out of fear, the boy would run off, if he would betray him, if he would be the very one to kill him or if instead he would do what he had been told to do. If not, even if the fatal hand was not his, Ion would still cause his death.

The pursuers were close, it was the right spot, Ion pulled in the reins and blocked the wheels against two large boulders left there for that purpose. The Count heard the men dismount from their horses, caught the clash of blades as they crossed and sharpened one another, fabric torn, leather scored, gasps and cries, groans and screams, curses and grunts, men's skin being slashed, and was counting on the blood from the wounded body Ion had thrown into the chest dripping onto the dust that he himself was. Young Ion, full of grace, I am with you. That blood gave him sustenance and strength for the last act to be performed in his solitary life.

In the few months he'd spent in London he had gone to see Ellen Terry each time she was onstage. He'd had white flowers delivered to her. He admired her, because she possessed a form of immortality that was not a curse. Others watched her, wrote about her, talked about her. They would continue to do so. They were alike, he and Ellen Terry. She was loved, he was not. But hate is also love. When she took a step onto the stage, she outshined the electric lights as if she were the sun. From her he had learned that there is a greater playwright than Shakespeare, namely Nature, and that there are actors greater than others who are neither Cleopatra nor Imogen nor Cordelia, but themselves. He and Ellen Terry. She eternal in others, he eternal in himself. The theater absolved and condemned, killed and resurrected. As the last act of his solitary life, Dracula would die. As the last act of her life as a mortal, Mina would be released from the monster's enchantment. This was the drama that Nature had written for them.

So, when Quincey P. Morris, with the sweeping, violent gestures of the New World from which he came, unhinged the lid and flung the gypsy's bleeding body out of the chest to stab the Count's heart, he didn't realize – deluded by eyes that were certain that truth and reality coincided, with one another and with justice – that he had failed. Knife in hand, he didn't realize that he had missed the mark. A knife into the dust.

The Count had raised the curtain and performed the sleight-of-hand. Not strong enough to die, he was still strong enough to live by dissolving into sleet, and gliding to the ground, beneath the wagon. There he slid past the white mantle and came to rest in the pool of earth mixed with blood that Ion had dug earlier and then soaked. In the days of his journey from London, Ion had been a digger. Although Quincey was shot dead, Harker and Van Helsing exulted because the battle was lost but the war was won. Mina screamed and raised her eyes to the sky. The sky opened; Dracula felt the heat of the fire set by the victors as it consumed the earth in the chest, the chest itself, and the wagon. He heard the horses let out one last whinny before crashing to the ground, shaking it. Ion had escaped, many of his men were dead, the blanket of snow did not melt.

He remained in that hiding place for a long time, days and days, coming out guardedly, anthropomorphizing in the milky light of dawn. He realized that the earth, not just his, but all of it, sustained him, the roots of millennial trees ordered vessels, younger and more flexible, to reach out and nourish him. The plants had not exiled him from their realm as men had. He emerged naked and pale as the moon, the young roots of springtime grass in his hair, around his head a crown of rabbit bones. Mushrooms and larvae grew in the warmth of his armpits and pubis. He knew that Mina was waiting for him in London and that he had to go. But before Mina he had to find Ion again, so he looked in the direction of the city, chanting the song of women at the river, and sat down.

Ion arrived at sunset holding the hand of a young boy. He offered him to the Count, and the boy did not draw back. This is your only brother, He is, indeed, my lord, all I have to give you, Then you must not give him to me. Ion knelt down, and Dracula knew he had a loyal follower. Kindness is a strategy.

Before returning to London to rejoin Mina, the Count again asked Ion's forgiveness for leading him into infinite time. But Ion was a simple soul, he was already living in the present, he did not rack his brains over causes and consequences, or perhaps, besides being simple, he was free. Dracula thanked him for rescuing him from death. We are not spared from dying, we have a slower life, we resemble certain plants, certain stones. Ion was not really listening to him, he was looking around and planning their

departure – let me go with you, my lord –, weighing the gold goblets, the sword hilts set with colored stones and other metals, the brocades and fustians, the spurs and boots, the silver forks and knives, and choosing what would stay and what would go. Piling everything in a room, Ion called his men, what was left of them, and arranged for the journey. The fertile earth was packed in an iron chest that looked like a trunk. Ion found a wooden one for himself as well. They rolled up the carpets, took down the paintings, collected chess pieces and chessboards, selected clothing and jewelry, silverware and plates, seals and books, daggers and revolvers; they had the Stations of the Cross removed from the church, those that were left, and wrapped them in dark, thick cloths; then, at night, they set off for Varna where a shipload of poor devils seeking their fortune awaited them, whose disappearance no one would mourn. Unlike the last time he had traveled, the Count spared the captain and the small crew, he paid. The short stay in the West had been enough for him to understand how much money compensates men for material and immaterial things. With and for money, human beings save their souls, forget atrocities, erase defeats, absolve murderers and thieves. Money is enough to be a curse and never enough to be a blessing, nevertheless, everyone is ready to risk the curse. Ion, with him, had learned the curses and blessings of human mortals. And of those who were no longer such.

Translator's notes:

The epigraph is from Susan Sontag, *As Consciousness Is Harnessed to Flesh: Journals and Notebooks*, 1964-1980.

The repeated words in the text mirror the lexical repetition, an intentional device, found in Bram Stoker's 1897 novel. On this point, cf. "Bloody Mary, Bloody Mary, Bloody Mary: Repetition in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*," by Savannah McClendon.

The well-known proverb "*Né di Venere né di Marte, non si sposa non si parte, né si dà principio all'arte*" expresses a common superstition in Italy that it is bad luck to get married on a Tuesday or a Friday, the days respectively dedicated to Mars, the god of war, and Venus, the goddess of love.