

The Shadow Prison

By Dirk Van Nouhuys

WHY WE LIKE IT: *A photographer's trek into a shadowy hinterland where reality is a series of dissolving frames like the images in a dark room is played against his own gradual fragmentation. Characters materialize and fade in a sometimes sinister narrative tinted with a mysterious disenchantment. Scintillating word chains emerge from passages emboldened with symbolic weight and everywhere there is the beauty of language. Quote: '...old vines silhouetted against the snow like fumbled writing.' And '...The red world was a quarter world, immersed in a dim, ambiguous haziness where crimson looked like black.' d '...an officer as forceful and composed as commonwealth...'. A story that transcends its genre and triumphs as a work of art.*

The Shadow Prison

The photographer worked patiently in a cistern in the backyard of a decrepit farmhouse as if waiting for answers to emerge on the paper maturing in his chemical trays. He had first seen the farmhouse when he was driving with his lover looking for a place for them to live together many years before. They entered the Small Valley — it was about 5 miles long and 3 miles wide surrounded by rolling hills — in late afternoon of an exceptionally clear day. The warm slanting sun, which highlighted the surrounding hills covered with dry grass, stopped his heart and sharpened every edge and angle of the ramshackle farmhouse, rendering it more meaningful than its reality. Always in love with light, the photographer, not yet a photographer then, had fallen in love with the aspect. No, 'love' is too simple word; it drenched him with longing and satisfaction, with nostalgia and hope, with regret and anticipation.

They stopped and stalked together around the house pushing aside dry weeds in the

sketchy remnant of a garden and later picking burrs off their socks. From the outside, it seemed the broken skull of a house or a skull twisted by gravity rather than shattered. Some windows were glassless, some whole, none rectilinear. The light picked out the grain of the weathered siding. The door pushed open. Inside was worse than out. The floor of the living room ballooned up and shreds of carpet had gathered against one wall as if blown by the wind of disquietude. No doorframes were straight, so no doors closed; some had been broken and used for firewood. The stairs to the second floor trembled disturbingly.

The building entranced them. It seemed to offer them an escape from world of conventions they felt onerous, as it had escaped, blown by the wind of time, from the world of social appearances, or from the hard-tack world of farming into a true world of aesthetic experiences. They longed to invite their friends. They longed to have their friends build with them an image of gaiety and light where they could realize longing.

They tracked down the property owner with some difficulty. She was an elderly woman who had retired to an apartment in the city. She leased her farm to someone who planned to plant it in wine grapes, but had not yet prepared the soil. She had been born in the house, spent her childhood there and hated, even feared, its present dilapidated condition as she feared her own mortality. She did not want to talk with them. They seemed to her children drunk with self-love. She referred them to the developer.

He was a gnarly, brown-skinned man with an Italian surname who'd grown up in the wine business in another part of the state and moved into property management when he was too arthritic to work the soil. He had a small but trendy office in a business building in the city. He liked the idea of somebody living on the land but worried about liability because of the condition of the house. The property guy agreed to let them live there and make whatever repairs to the house they would pay for at a trivial rent, but made them sign a paper that tried to excuse him from anything bad that could happen.

The photographer alone signed the papers because his lover's family must not know.

It was their dream of a life-space, a dream that rendered them, the pair of them, more real than real. They did not paint the siding. They did not straighten the windows, the doorways, or the bowed up floors. Instead of painting, the house the photographer began to take pictures of the weathered wood in all angles of light and other fashions, as it was in foggy days or rainy days or employing the infrared spectrum. They cleaned out several rooms, connected the electricity, proliferated extension chords, spread sleeping bags for bedrooms, and brought the dishes she had inherited from her grandmother. And they invited their friends. She worked in the city at a job she found boring and humiliating; he worked in the city at a job he liked. Every day they drove to work regretfully and returned with pleasure as if returning not to reality, but to something more special. Every Friday they loaded their cars with food and wine so they would not have to leave the Small Valley until the following Monday morning. They invited their friends for wine and dancing and spending the night and waited into the future. Where better to wait for the future than in a place that seemed outside of time? Winters were rainy and sometimes snowy. Their friends helped them renew the roof and replace the broken windows, sometimes with glass and sometimes only boarding them over. But they did not buy furniture. And, while the rain fell in sheets in fall and spring, they spread sleeping bags and pillows, listened to music, danced comically on the bowed floors, played board games, and talked about how safe and away they felt. In the winter they blew fuses when they huddled by the heaters, and through the window watched old vines silhouetted against the snow like fumbled writing. A 19th-century enameled bathtub on claw feet so large they could nestle in it together filled the bathroom. They replaced the water heater and the piping but left the tile floor cracked and worn. One of their friends was a gilder and lined the tub with gold leaf as a house-warming present. The following summer the photographer cleared the only chimney.

They mowed and watered the backyard into a rough lawn and put up a volleyball net where on sunny weekend afternoons the group would leap and cry out with the speed of the game. One day the photographer leaped to strike a ball down the other side's throat and, when he came to earth on one foot, the earth broke and he slipped into emptiness to his knee. Everyone stopped, fell to their knees, and began digging at the soil, dragging up buried planks -; and so they discovered the cistern, which had lain forgotten under wooden cover since city water reached the house years before. The roof was rotting wood, but the walls and floor were concrete. It was still the days of film and paper when a photographer needed a darkroom to work and he immediately knew the place was made for him. The gnarly lessor and the elderly owner refused to touch the project and warned him they would not be liable for injuries. With the help of their friends, he cleaned it up, put on a new roof with a ventilation fan and an entrance that gave access by wall ladder to the floor. He ran in a water line and built tanks, moved in his dryer, ran an electric line to provide both white light, and the dark red light used in developing. An eclectic heater also glowed red. He built a light-trapping closet around the ladder half way up the wall so a visitor might enter, close out the day, then open a second trap door and enter the red world.

He lived in one and three-quarters worlds. One was the world of color, filled with panoply of vivid interplay. Even in winter the starkness of the weeds and fallen fences against the snow brightened his eye like color. The black and white portrayal in his photographs was half a world, where every surface was incised with shades of death. In the cistern he had mounted four dark red bulbs, which took advantage of the eye's greater sensitivity to red light than the sensitivity of the photographic emulsions, one on each wall, so he could work briefly with film and paper open. The red world was a quarter world, immersed in a dim, ambiguous haziness where crimson looked like black.

However the light fell, the lessor's plans for the house hung motionless while time blew through the valley. Obscurely dissatisfied, his lover left him. The friends scattered and

were not renewed. The photographer quit his job to concentrate on his work. Partly he concentrated on refined darkroom techniques, sitting for hours in the red world sloshing slowly morphing images. He did not carry a telephone into the cistern. People who came there had to knock on the lightproof trap door. He was glad to see them, but they had to be willing to climb up and down the covered ladder, like a small vertical hallway, and be able to do so. When the light was right he ranged the valley, but he did not take landscape pictures. He sought out signs of human departure: rusting harrows, foundations half hidden and cracked, fence posts and barbed wire returning to earth as if rooting toward an underground stream.

The photographer made a vegetable garden. He scrounged an old wine barrel from a small, deserted vineyard and punched out aeration holes for composting. He often took his meals down into the darkroom/cistern and sometimes forgot them as he worked. One day he carried up some uneaten sandwiches and a sour pitcher of milk and was pouring them into the compost barrel when the compost barrel appeared to be filled with the milky liquid, and he realized he needed to add more garbage to solidify it. Just then he heard the sound of a car on the front yard gravel, and soon a heavy-set woman with long blonde hair dressed in informal, almost ragged earth-toned sweater and slacks came around the corner of the house towards him. He recognized her with pride and shame as someone whom he had employed to do graphic art in the past. She asked for her original drawings. He had thrown away most of his old work paper, so he was afraid he could not find them. But he had stored some of it in boxes in the cistern. When they climbed together into the cistern, he easily found them. After she left, he returned to the cistern, gathered the rest of the papers, carried them in one arm as he groped up the ladder with the other, and stuffed them into the compost barrel until the white liquid turned to mushy papier-mâché.

A few days later, he decided instead of photographing in the Valley, to climb to the ridgeline, which the sun picked out brightly each dawn above the Small Valley. He

would visit his son who had recently moved to the crest with his new wife. He put on hiking boots and country clothes.

He loaded his backpack with bread, cheese, a wineskin, binoculars, and a single camera in a leather case. He wound up dirt roads and well-worn hiking trails all morning. Halfway up to the ridge he met three kids on bicycles resting beside the dirt road. One was a wiry Hispanic, maybe 15 standing beside a flashy bike. One was a plump blonde girl with a round, pink face, a little younger. She wore carefully faded and torn blue jeans and a man's white shirt. The third was a skimpy, pale, dark-haired kid with a pimply face, in tight jeans and a Joe Camel T-shirt. As he, smiling, passed them, the girl held out her hand indifferently for alms. He passed her a dollar. When he had progressed a few steps, the Hispanic caught up, walked beside him, and intimated that he could have the services of the blond girl at a reasonable price. Some bitter memory assailed him; he shook his head ruefully and continued. He stopped for lunch before reaching the ridgeline in a comfortable spot where he could look out over the valley or beyond where distant suburbia merged into the city.

After about half an hour more hiking, he came to a sign bearing in grey silhouette one and two-story buildings including a church and what appeared to be an inn. A narrow finger pointed further up the path. He remembered walking in the countryside in Europe and encountering such signs, tongueless so tourists in regions crowded with small languages would not confront oblivion. He climbed over a small rise and approached the town when someone standing by the road put his fingers to his lips and told him *sotto voce* that he must speak quietly because the old center of town had been transformed into a living memorial to a recent catastrophe. Everything, stores, dwellings, even the camera shop, was covered with fine gray ash, — six inches deep in places. The people wore black clothes and hats and were dusted with grey as well. A small concrete stage occupied the opposite, up-hill side of the town square. Circles of grey concrete benches like the seating of a Greek theater rose up the hill behind it.

Local people by turns performed memorial ceremonies without sound or color on the stage.

The hiker proceeded towards the theater. A very tall man in a trench coat with wild ashy hair paced back and forth between the square and the stage making random violent gestures with his arms. The hiker stepped forward. Half involved and half isolated, he brushed against the tall, mad man. He reached to dust off his shoulder, but found all his clothes, his hands, his shoes, already thickly dusted with the ash, shook himself, and continued toward a concrete stairway, which ran up the middle of the benches. He took a seat on a bench. He was the lone sitter; all the other figures were standing or walking, making shadowy movements, each one lost in a pantomime of grief. The exceptions were members a group of Japanese tourists wearing once bright but now dust-drenched clothing, assembling themselves at the top of the seats. A fancy camera, a Konica, was left behind on a step. He spoke out aloud to call attention to the camera. Mourners sustained their movements, the tourists excepted, as if he had not spoken. It belonged to one of the tourist group. She tripped down the stairs, retrieved it, and, smiled, brushing ashes from her lips with her fingers, and thanked him. Someone else in the group commented on his honesty.

When the tourists passed below sight on the other side, the hiker climbed to the rim of the theatre, where stood a sign like the one he had seen at the entrance to the village. It was black on white with an arrow pointing down hill and the silhouette of a farmhouse. Far down the path, he could see the tourists turning a bend and disappearing from view. He trekked after them, but never saw them again.

In half an hour, he was on a wide path with many small rocks winding down among rolling hills covered with dry grass and spotted with clumps of oaks. He caught up with the three adolescents, who were holding colloquy beside the path. A bicycle leaned untended against a fence post and they appeared to be discussing it. It was not a

normal bicycle. It had a frame like a normal bicycle, but four wheels. Between the rear wheels were mounted a set of turning scythes, as if it had been built to mow lawns. The hiker approached the Hispanic leader and proposed buying the bike, which he was uncertain they owned. The Hispanic looked at him dubiously and led him aside as he had when he offered the plump blond. After some canny haggling, they settled on the same price. The hiker climbed on the bike and, since they were on a flat stretch, peddled briskly away. Soon the road ran downhill, and he began coasting. The path was worn to gravel in two ruts the width of the bicycles' wheels. Green grass and small, blue flowers bright as eyes flourished between the ruts. The blades on the rear axel sliced them down like the wind of time. He glanced back at the kids. They gathered as before, regarding him with curiosity and perhaps a little dread. He felt a rush of love for them. He thought of photographing them, but realized he had left his camera in the Ashy Village. It did not seem worth retracing his way.

A noise like the moaning of children began to emerge from the blades in the course of a steep, frightening descent. He braked at a wide, flat spot, arched his leg over the frame, and bent to examine the axel. As he was bent, two girls walked up, one about twelve, the other six or seven. He straitened, surprised to see them appear from nowhere in sparse, open country. He was wearing a narrow, black tie; the older girl darted at him, pulled it off his neck mockingly, and scampered a short distance away. She was wearing a white peasant blouse with little embroidered flowers and a khaki skirt; she had frizzy red-blond hair and a bright smirk. He climbed off the bike, ran, and caught up with her. He was trying to wrestle his tie away from her when she tossed it to the younger girl. She had straight, dark hair, snarling eyes, and was dressed in a khaki uniform like a Girl Scout that blended in with the color scheme of dry earth, dry grass, and low shrubs. He picked up a handful of dirt and put it down the loose peasant blouse that the older girl was wearing in a childish effort to force them to return his tie. The younger girl ran away with his tie, stopped, squatted, held it between her knees, and pissed on it. He kept dumping dirt down the peasant blouse of the older girl who remained standing

petulantly. He heard the crunching boots behind. An officer as forceful and composed as commonwealth in a khaki uniform and a badge was standing on the edge of the path. The biker worried that the officer would think the girls were his victims, but the canny peacekeeper had sized them up and ordered the younger girl to give back his tie. She ran over to the bike and wrung out his tie over the shaft with the scything blades, then handed it mockingly to the biker, dancing merrily backward from his reach. He examined the shaft. It was slightly cracked. The biker took toilet paper out of his back pack and was wiping the piss off when the officer asked to see it and pointed out the traces of some of grey stuff on it. He asked the biker if he thought the younger girl has poisoned it. The hiker took out his knife and shaved the gray substance off in curls that tumbled into the dust. He said, no, it must have been glue used to repair the lawnmower mechanism. He remounted the bike, but the noise was louder. The officer shook his head. The hiker abandoned the bike and continued on foot while the officer hurried the two girls away.

Now the farmhouse in the small valley, was painted white so it stood among the withered plants and broken farm equipment like something made of ice or snow. The hiker knew better than to knock on the door, and walked around the house on a path of autumn weeds. Bits of ash from his clothing fell little patches of snow. The hatch that led down to the darkroom lay supine before him like a portal to another world. The photographer had installed a latch system to keep light from leaking in. No visitor could open the top door and lower himself into the light trap unless the bottom hatch of the light trap was closed. The hiker tried the latch. It was locked, so the bottom door must be open. He got his knife out of his backpack and resourcefully dug out the wood around the screws that mounted the latch until he could disengage it. He removed his shoes and laid them on the earth by the frame. He slid through the hatch, barely opening the least slit so light would not announce him, lowered himself quietly into the light trap, and then down the remaining steps of the ladder to the floor without disturbing the photographer who, with his back to the ladder, intensely bent over an

image maturing in a tray. He was developing pictures of his lover made by her family when she was a child.

The four dark-red safe lights and the glow of a heater made the room, cluttered with objects and half finished projects, both cold and warm. The hiker drew his knife and, on soft feet with black socks, stepped toward the enchanted photographer. When he reached the spot, he raised his arm and plunged the knife into his back. The photographer pitched forward into his work with a grunt and a gurgling noise. The biker struck again and again. Blood came out of his back and out of his mouth and flowed into the tank of developer where an image struggled toward recognizability. In the red world, the blood looked black.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *First of all, from my childhood I have been a serious amateur photographer and sloshed paper in tanks of chemicals when that is what you did. When I was in college decades ago my then girlfriend and I flirted with the idea of living together. It was not very serious because of dorm rules of the time and the requirement we extensively deceive our parents. But one day we wandered by chance into a lovely little sunny valley, saw a very ramshackle house, and had fantasies about renting it. In some intervening decade the house and valley came to my mind and seemed an image of different lives I might have lived, other selves I might have been. Writing fiction is partly a process being other selves. Then I had a dream pretty much like the visit to the ashy village described here. When I tried to blend that material into a story, the rest flowed. Perhaps we feel some hatred for those other selves because we feel we have failed them.*

BIO: *I'm a native of Berkeley with a BA from Stanford in creative writing and an MA from Columbia in contemporary literature. I worked for decades as a tech writer in Silicon Valley. A few years ago I devoted full time to fiction. I write short stories, some experimental forms, and occasionally verse, but mostly novels, four of which have been published in excerpts or serially. About 80 items of fiction and a few poems have appeared in literary and general magazines. I occasionally publish translations and photography. You can learn more about me at my website www.wandd.com and see a complete list of publications at <http://www.wandd.com/Site/Publications.html>*