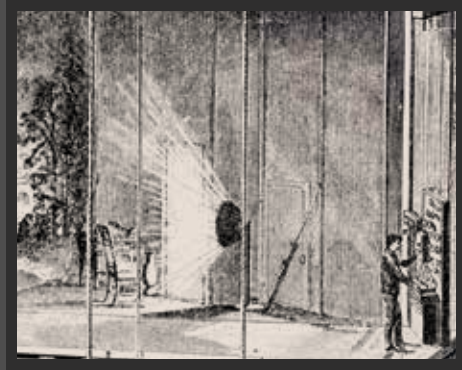


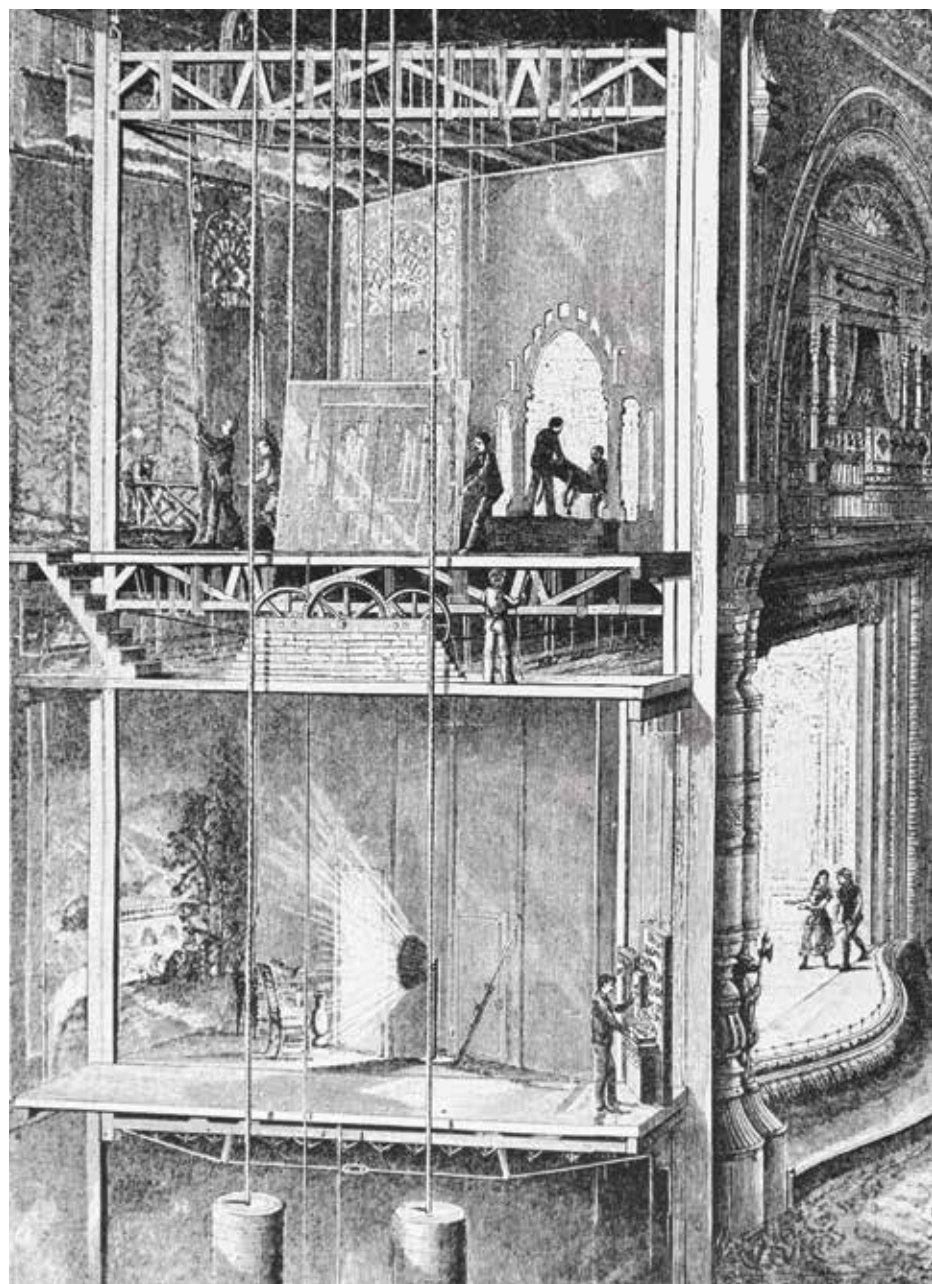
HOURS

Philip Morgan



HOURS

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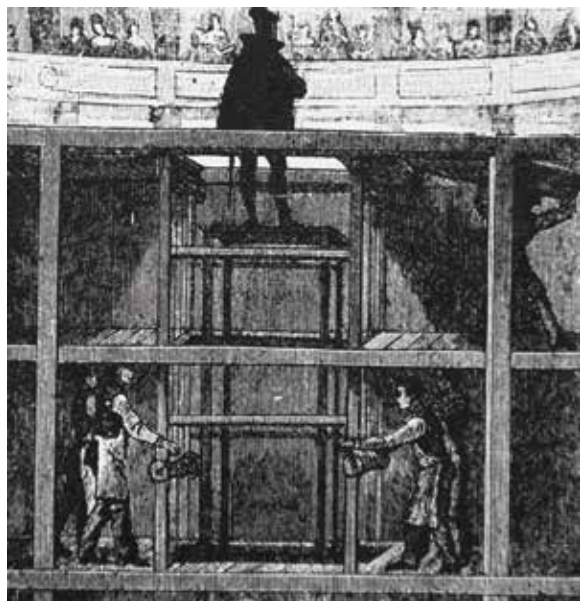
HOURS

Philip Morgan

SIXTH FLOOR PUBLISHING

TIMOR MORTIS
CONTURBAT ME

VIGILS

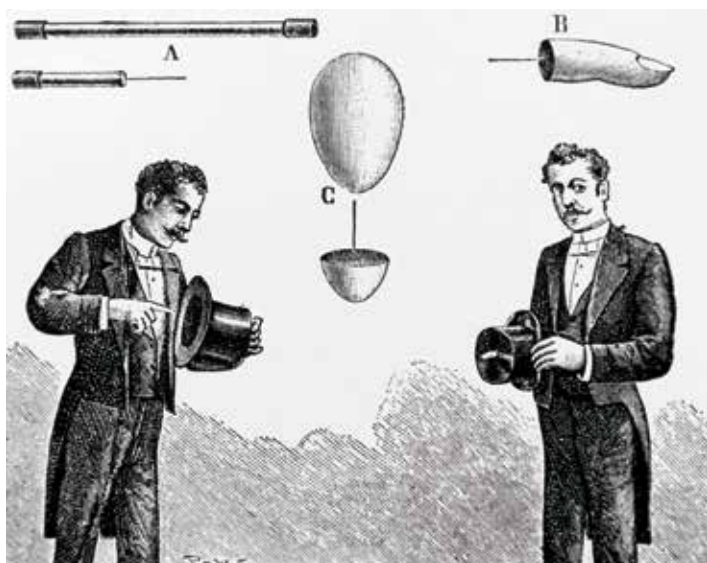


NOCTURNE I

Death appears:

*Airing out the robe
of one no more:
autumn cleaning.*

Chine
(tr. Yoel Hoffman)



IT IS A MOIST AFTERNOON AND I AM DYING.

The street is tawdry in the damaged sunlight.

Sweat gathers at my hairline.

When I was young sweating was vigorous; now it sticks to my skin, slides slow down my body.

No part of me functions as efficiently as it did.

The process of ageing is, I think, as I pause to regain my breath, to quiet my heart, a good example of entropy: more and more effort being used to less and less effect.

The shrunken, bow-fronted Regency dwellings in this street, with their unusable balconies, are not what they should be. They are third-best, a low rung on the ladder of aspiration, built for people who were not what they wished to be.

Nothing is as it should be. My life has not been as it should have been. I am in many ways a failure.

Coming up between the buildings, I see a figure wearing a red coat and pushing an antique pram.

I wonder how it has come to this.

I know that each and every thing is dying from the moment that it is born, that all things are moving irreversibly towards disorder and death. However, it is still surprising to discover that it applies to me – that I am not, for some unspecified but undeniable reason, exempt.

There must be an error.

My cardiologist draws a line on a blank sheet of paper. It is a downward-descending line. He makes three small transverse strokes across the line. This is where your heart function should be, he says, pointing the golden nib of his fountain pen. This where it was two weeks ago. This is where it is now. The deterioration is very rapid. We must consider a major intervention.

I watch the figure
push his antique pram to me.
I am in decline

My heart beats more and more
to less and less effect.

He puts me on the waiting list for a heart transplant; I hold out little hope and am not convinced they could replace something that I have been accused so often of not having.

I had been interested in the echocardiogram: the indistinct pulsing image on the small screen in the windowless room, the sounds of blood being pumped through my heart. The technician explained that these were not the actual sounds but an interpretation of electronic pulses.

Everything that we perceive is an interpretation of electronic pulses.

I once saw a representation of the wavelengths that move through the air and through us: ultra-violet, infra-red, gamma, micro, radio, magnetic. I find the thought of these vibrations comforting.

I have never enjoyed uncertainty, emptiness, space.

I can recognise those who have received notice of their imminent death. They walk with shoulders that are pulled forward at the edges. Their heads are bowed as their vision is drawn inwards to the centre of their being. Their steps have a minute hesitation. There is a diminution of pressure around them. They pass through crowds.

The figure in the red coat toiling up the hill towards me I have known for thirty years. He is a conjurer. He is not an intimate but has been a presence on the periphery of the outdoor shows I used to produce. He was often surrounded by a small crowd of children who were both amused and horrified by the rituals that he performed: transfixed by immanent darkness.

The conjurer recognises me. He is grateful to be able to pause in his journey. He methodically applies the brake to the pram. He touches the brim of his battered Panama hat. How are you? he asks.

I pause before replying. The process of dealing with my death has become all-encompassing. I no longer have the space for other thoughts or activities. I am fully occupied by my mortality.

Now I realise that my death is imminent I am mildly surprised at my response. I have no desire to contact long-lost friends for, after all, there was a reason why they were lost. I have no desire to visit ruined buildings or stare at distant mountain peaks. What I have is the overwhelming desire to behave correctly. I have no interest in definitions that originate with others. I have not accepted that anyone else can issue any truthful judgement on my actions since I was raped at the age of nine. When the huge urgent figure with wiry chest hair, throbbing cock and overpowering scent of aftershave seized me in his arms he extinguished and penetrated me in a way that reamed out my soul. Abuse at a young age leaves one isolated,

aware that other people's judgements of you are graded according to how much or how little they can use you to satisfy their desires without exposing themselves to attack. You trust no one. Correct is to not expose yourself to any other, to deal with situations on your own, to cry silently during the night; that is correct.

The angiogram was both futile and humiliating.

I had to shave off half my pubic hair.

The surgeon gave me a rapid run-down of the risks:

Allergic reaction.
Haematoma, or stroke.
Ruptured artery.

Irregular heartbeat.
Death.

Lying on the gurney being wheeled through the corridor to the operating theatre was familiar. I had seen the sequence so many times: the rectangular fluorescent ceiling lights processing past as I listened to the hum of the rubber wheels on the vinyl floor. Clichéd, I thought.

There was quite a crowd in the operating theatre. Two young women were there to watch the procedure. I smiled, said I hoped that they would enjoy the show. They laughed, awkwardly.

I knew that they were going to insert a catheter into my femoral artery and then push it up into my heart, where they would then release a dye.

I avoided thinking about the symbolic significance of that act.

I felt nothing; I had already received a local anaesthetic. I appreciated the modesty sheet; I had no desire to see the insertion. There was a scraping, grinding noise, which was accompanied by a shoulder movement on the surgeon's part that resembled the motion required to remove the head of a chicken. I had a vision of myself as an item of clumsy and inefficient manufacture made from interlocking threaded parts of brass and copper with perhaps the occasional piece of chrome. I experienced a wave of fuzziness, a sense of my distinctness fading, a conviction that I was changing into smoke. The dye, I thought; I am allergic to the dye; it is killing me. There was an absolute, visceral imperative to escape. I raised my head. I cursed. I begged for help. I attempted to get off the table. I saw the white faces of the students as they moved back; then there were hands holding me down, a mask clamped onto my face; I acquiesced.

The conjurer's face is strangely smooth, no stray hairs emerging from nostrils or ears or from the crevices so difficult to reach once you pass sixty. He looks as if he has been buffed.

I say that I am good, which taking into account the parameters of my condition is correct.

Just done a gig at the Brunswick Festival, he says.
How did it go?
Slow.

We have little to say to each other. We engage when we meet because it indicates a level of continuity in our lives and, while implicit within our meeting is the possibility that this will be the last, there is also the prospect of another: that the chain of our existence will continue.

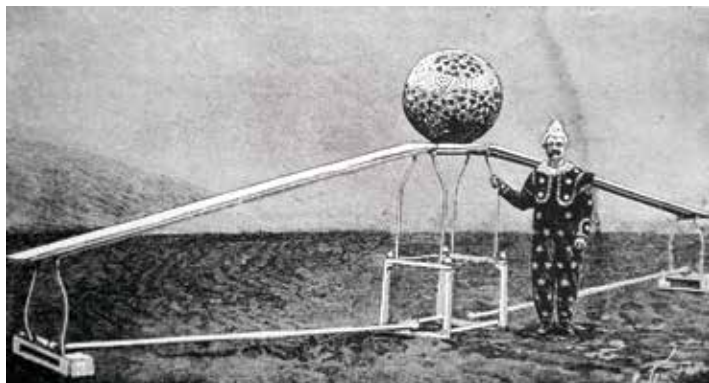
Did you hear that Jimmy Collier has died? I nod. I did hear that. I knew him slightly. He was a writer and performer who had pursued relentlessly the staging of a piece he had written about a labour dispute in South Wales in the nineteenth century. He had put it on at the Edinburgh Festival, at his own expense. Pancreatic cancer. And Frank? Frank, a maker, gassed himself on his allotment. I nod

again. Laurence? An unlikely victim of lung cancer. There's a good few of us, he says, already over the other side. Indeed. I nod yet again, smile inanely.

Cancer. Heart attack.
Liver failure. Blood clot.
Suicide by gas.

He leans straight-armed on the pram, which contains his magic table and feathers and balloons and marked cards: tools of the trade. When we get there, he says, there'll be enough of us to put on a nice little show. He bends forward, undoes the brake on the pram. I watch as he moves up the slope, shout after him. Something to look forward to, then. He waves one hand in silent acknowledgement; does not look back.





NOCTURNE 2

The realisation of disintegration:

*No sign
in the cicada's song
that it will soon be gone.*

Aki-no-bo
(tr. Yoel Hoffman)



IT IS PAST MIDNIGHT.
I AND AN ELEPHANT WALK
SO SILENT THROUGH THE SURF.

At my drama school there was a girl called Liza. She paid her way through college by performing sex acts in front of a businessman once a week. After college she got a job in a circus, in Italy, as an elephant-rider. She wore long needle-like spurs. Her legs were concealed behind the elephant's ears. When she finished her act and got off the elephant, outside the tent, leaving the amazed children and charmed adults behind, her legs were slick with blood. She used to wipe them down with a towel.

My job is to be
walking with Max by the sea
as the snowflakes fall.

No one used spurs on Max; it wasn't necessary. When he arrived, with the ice-show, they laid down a black plastic pond liner, which they filled with a network of pipes. They connected the pipes to chillers. The chillers were mounted on lorries and sat in the loading bay. They had two Portakabins as offices. They toured all over the



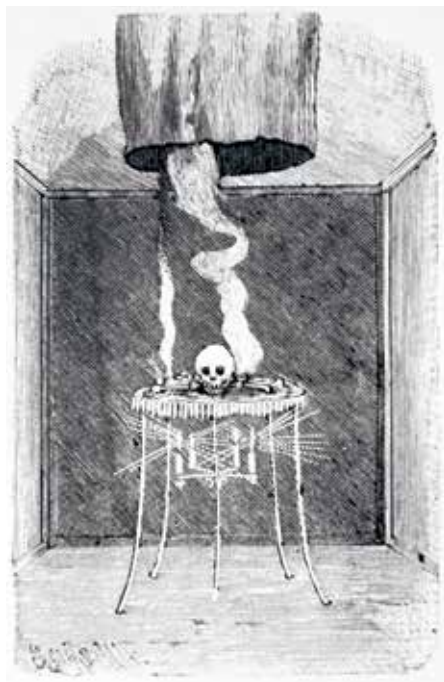
world. In South America parents brought their children not to see the show but to see the ice.

In 1876 a mechanically frozen ice rink was opened by John Gamgee at 379 King's Road, Chelsea. The rink initially proved a success; however, the process was expensive, and the mists rising from the ice deterred customers, forcing it to close by the end of the year.

I like to imagine the ladies in their long dresses being gradually overwhelmed by the mist as they describe elegant circles on the ice.

We build things: layer on layer, until they form a skin. Then one day the chillers get turned off, the ice begins to melt and the men with sledgehammers arrive as Max walks silent by the sea.





NOCTURNE 3

Despair/the void:

*Sick on a journey –
over parched fields
dreams wander on.*

Basho
(tr. Lucien Stryk)



THE UNIMAGINABLE OCCURS EVERY DAY.

In 1995 I lay in a bed. There was a crack in the ceiling. I had thought of cleaning it, widening it, then filling it, but the ceiling was too high. The apartment was old. The bed was cheap and low, the quilt worn.

A woman slept beside me. I touched her shoulder. It was smooth, rounded, warm.

The crack ran from corner to corner. It divided the ceiling.

She raised her head.
I'm leaving, I said; my voice was calm.

If the ceiling had been whole, if the paint had not been flaking, things would have been different.

The woman sat up. She turned on the bedside light. The lampshade was scorched, tasselled, yellow: a remnant of her dead husband.

The beginning of cramp.
I sit up in the bed.
I flex my foot.

The woman turned towards me. Her breasts were small, pointed and narrow, the nipples tight. Her hair, cut short, rose in small spikes, the grey concealed by auburn dye. Her skin was smooth and white. There were two vertical lines at each corner of her mouth. I can't stay, I said. Why not? Because it wouldn't be right. She got out of the bed. She walked naked across the room. She put on a short, thin, black faux silk dressing gown. She pulled the belt tight and sat on the stool in front of her makeshift dressing table. I could see her inner thigh, the shadow of her pubic hair. I listened to a solitary car slow and then stop. I listened to it drive away.

A careful creature,
the most measured of men,
alone in the void.

I see my life as if through
a gap torn in the curtain.

It had been snowing in Berlin. There were prostitutes outside my hotel. I watched one from the bar. She was dressed in a white ski-suit. She had blonde hair. She stood by the edge of the road. Car headlights illuminated her. Thin snow drifted round her shoulders. I imagined paying for my coffee, putting on my coat and walking across the tarmac to her. I imagined taking her to a small room. I imagined a mirrored counterpane, a mattress on the floor. I imagined a darkness that would welcome me. I bought myself a small brandy.

Did you meet someone in Berlin? Did you fuck them? She lit a cigarette, blew smoke narrow through her nostrils. I don't mind if you did. We could phone her up, invite her over, share her.

I wondered at her rapaciousness, the impossibility of her desire.

In the morning I walked from my hotel to the Brandenburg Gate: down Friedrichstrasse and then right along Unter den Linden. In

the curved glass of the Sony building I imagined the Reichstag in flames. I was in Berlin to see a show. It presented no particular difficulties. There was a ceiling piece that would make lighting difficult in some venues, and one effect where a wardrobe penetrated that ceiling from above and sand and papers fell from it. The mechanism enabling this to occur was primitive but efficient.

I like primitive things that achieve their objective with the minimum of complication. In my experience the unforeseen emerges from the interstices contained within machinery. It is difficult to police that which only exists as a consequence of the proximity of other objects. This is, I believe, an essential truth, not only of my former profession but of life itself.

After seeing the show I went back to the bar at the hotel and watched the same prostitute. I could not recover the optimism of the previous night and went to bed, where I fell into a troubled sleep: dreams of dogs and sheep in a grey landscape where banks of cloud rolled over escarpments. The next morning I walked. I did not need to be at the theatre until five. It was colder than I had expected: twelve below. Thin snow blew through the streets.

I went to a museum; a holocaust museum. Why? The in-flight magazine had said that it was not to be missed.

At this point, in the darkness, as I write in silence, in pencil, in a found notebook on a pine-topped table, I can see the infinite desirability of the museumification of my life: each incident contained in a glass case; each case secure, locked.

I took the S-Bahn to Wannsee. It was bitterly cold. I walked along a road: on one side leafless trees, on the other rich men's houses. There was a lake. The gate to the museum grounds was locked. I went down a flight of stone steps to a small paved area that overlooked the lake. A lion stared blind across the water. There was a stall selling hot drinks. I bought a coffee and walked to the balustrade, warming my hands on the chipped glass mug. The lake was calm, the sun intermittent, my coat inadequate, the family groups loud, vulgar, argumentative.

I finished my coffee and walked into the woods. The path was broad, over-used, the small amount of winter undergrowth littered with sweet papers, soiled tissues, dog shit. It led to the edge of the lake. There were groups of Germans out for their Sunday morning walk: dogs and children and grandparents. The wind from the lake penetrated me. I found a small dirty beach, the grey sand dotted with cigarette ends. Behind me I could hear dogs barking, children crying, adults shouting. I went to the water's edge. Between the water and the land there was a three-inch-wide fragmented boundary of ice. The grey flakes rubbed against each other, making a tinkling sound. To the left and right of the beach, bushes and small trees bent to meet the water. Their lower extremities were sheathed in ice. I realised that the water must have been more turbulent in the recent past, that waves must have immersed the branches and that the residue of the immersion must have frozen in the cold air.

In my desire to protect myself I have destroyed myself; my life is un-lived.

I stopped at the black-painted wrought-iron gates and rang the bell. I walked up a neat gravelled drive to the pillared entrance. I knocked on the polished hard-wood door. A woman in her sixties opened the door. She was plump and motherly. She was concerned that I should hang up my inadequate coat correctly. The villa was overheated. She handed me a guidebook written in English and then paused as if about to tell me something, not about the house or the exhibition but about me. Then the bell rang and she went away.

They planned the Final Solution there, signed the papers, in a room with a polished table that overlooked the lake. What's that got to do with us? Everything.

Some text:

A young man with rolled-up sleeves was armed with an iron crowbar. He yanked a man from a group (and) killed him with one or several blows to the back of his head. In this manner, within three-quarters of an hour, he slew a group of from 45 to 50 persons.

Report by a photographer on the pogrom at Kovno



A photograph:

Lvov (Lemberg), July 25–27, 1941

There was a picture of a young woman. So? She made an impression on me. The woman at the dressing table stared at me, eyes narrowed against drifting smoke. You rescued me, she said. I didn't mean to, I replied; that was not my intention.

In the museum I sat on a narrow wooden bench. I tried to see the young man with rolled-up sleeves. I tried to see the piles of bodies: tidy, arms to their sides. I tried to smell the blood.

I don't want to pretend, I said. Pretend what? That everything is all right. What's wrong? Everything. And leaving me will make it right? Staying with you will make it worse.

I lay down the pencil.

I shudder.

Sleep is not possible.

