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Nathaniel Axel
Tomb for 500,000 Soldiers
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Who is it then that moves about, that keeps watch and lies in wait in this house? –Poritzky, Gespenstergeschichten

Yesterday I returned from three weeks in Belgium. While there, I had an experience that made a great impression on me. I think it may even have changed my entire way of looking at things; troubled my soul, as people say. It is unfortunate that I could not make this record while still in Brussels, but I found it impossible. I felt that something terrible might happen as I sat by myself in my bedroom writing it all down.

Just then the door opened and Frida came in. She staggered over to the armchair beside the fire and sank into it, staring wild-eyed at each of us in turn.

“Frida!” I cried. “What’s the matter?”

The councilor and Frau Pilz appeared in the yellow haloes of the candles they were holding. The sisters clapped their hands like a rustle of leaves.

“Fraulein Eleonore!” sobbed Frida. “Dear God, how are we going to find her?”

Her room was empty. The candelabrum was standing on the floor and its candles were still burning peacefully, with their delicate pink flames. We searched the whole house and even went out on the roof.

She was sitting on a toilet seat, completely naked, but with her hands tied behind her back. A man in black was leaning over her who had the same features as her father, with a more smiling expression, mocking perhaps. Although it was very bright, he held a lit candle that he moved closer to one of her breasts, as if to better observe its stiff areola. The flame was actually so close to her flesh that the pink tip of her nipple was sizzling, starting, very quickly, to catch fire. She was experiencing an intense emotion as a result, closer to surprise than to fear or suffering, and only said in a low voice, “Can’t you see, father, that I am on fire?”

At that moment, when everything was about to sink into death, the door opened. An immensely tall old woman came in. I saw only her terrible green eyes glowing in her unimaginable face. A flame licked my left hand. I stepped back as much as my strength allowed. I saw Meta still standing motionless with a strange grimace on her face, and realized that her soul too, had flown away. Then the monstrous old woman’s eyes, without pupils, slowly looked around the flame-filled room and came to rest on me.

The sky became charged with roaring thunder, the earth with tumultuous rain. I tried to shelter in the adjacent wood, but instantly found myself enmeshed in vines and suckers, lacerated by invisible spears. In a minute I should be drenched. I plunged through the wet weeds towards the spreading portico.

Before the big doors I waited for several minutes, watching the lightning, and listening. The rain leapt up where it fell, as if the earth hurt it. A rising chill made the old grass shiver. It seemed unlikely that anyone could live in a house so dark; but suddenly I heard one of the doors behind me scrape open.

And then I wondered what the end would be, for I had no hope now that the end could be averted. It was uncanny, too, that the sun should be so bright in the sky and still we could see nothing.

Within twenty-four hours I perceived clearly enough that there could have been no dog, no little animal

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squatting on the lantern, no picture over the bed, and probably no adopted daughter. That hardly needed saying. The trouble was, and is, that this obvious truth only makes things worse. Indeed it is precisely where the real trouble begins.

About the artist :

Nathaniel Axel (born 1984, Philadelphia, PA, USA) lives and works in Brooklyn, NY USA.

Recent solo exhibitions include *Weird Tales* at Karma (New York).

Recent group exhibitions include *Love For Three Oranges* at Gladstone Gallery (Brussels); *The Painter of Modern Life*, organized by Bob Nickas at Anton Kern (New York); *Beyond The Pale*, organized by Sam McKinnis at Interstate Projects (New York); *Das Optische Unbewusste / The Optical Unconscious* at Kunst(zeug)haus (Rapperswil, Switzerland) and *Bepad* at Lowell Hotel (New York).