Aljoša Harlamov: The Doctor and the Water Sprite

a historical crime novel

translated from the Slovene by Gregor Timothy Čeh

Although the book uses historical names and events, the plot itself is largely fictional and its purpose is to create suspense. In some instances, mixing history with fiction adds a little gravity, in others even a little humour. That reality alone is at times horrifying, at other times amusing, is no fault of the author of this novel.

Saturday and Sunday, 20 – 21 June 1835

Prologue

Through his damp eyes he just caught sight of her long skirt disappearing around the corner. Pushing himself away from the stinking wall he staggered in that direction. He managed a couple of metres, perhaps three, then he would have fallen had he not caught his balance against another wall. This one also stank of piss. The whole town stank of piss.

Where did she go? He tried to recall where he had last seen her. He called out after her. Or had he just imagined that? Did he even open his mouth? He swallowed. Felt sick. Rasped as he breathed.

His ears still filled with rollicking and drunken laughter, clinking and cheers. He must reek of tobacco and pungent staleness. Perhaps this was why he felt guilty. But he had felt guilty all his life. Guilty of… everything. Who knows why Carniolans always feel so guilty.

Still, he would apologise to her, if only she would give him a chance. It wasn't his fault. Not really.

Sweat was pouring from him. He felt he was becoming lighter. At least from the neck down. The head remained heavy and bloated, buzzing unbearably.

Through the veil of tears and sweat he then once again spotted her skirt. Was she hiding, fighting him?

Before he knew it, he was after her again. He heard the uneven clacking of his heels echoing along the empty street. Then he saw a new wall approaching him. This one also swaying. It too must stink in this unbearable heat that no longer abated even at night.

He clutched the corner she had just disappeared round, crying out triumphantly – perhaps once again only within. The nausea was already reaching his throat.

He could barely move his enormous head. As if it had gotten stuck somewhere below the low eaves of the slanting house. The entire town was slanting, toppling over. Eventually he made himself look round the corner. *Peek-a-boo*!

Despite the heavy eyelids, the teary gaze and the darkness, he somehow still saw her. Basically not her. All this time, all he had been seeing was the hem of her skirt. And he could not even make out its colour. What he knew was that it was not dirty even though it dragged along the ground. This almost annoyed him. What kind of trick was this?

Once again he merely saw the skirt disappearing behind the corner of the house he was leaning against.

With his small hands, forever stained with ink, he pulled himself around the building, staggering against the wall until his feet somehow found a rhythm. After her. Right behind her. Into the dark narrow street hiding from the moonlight.

The ground swayed left and right, and mostly downward. As he ran he could barely keep his eyes open. The humidity hit his face, panting he tried to blow it aside. His head was now also buzzing with exertion. He waded through open sewers filled with the shit and piss of his respectable fellow townsfolk. His shoes squelched but he did not stop.

Because he couldn’t stop.

He crashed into the wall, and immediately after into another one, though it could have been the same one. In his drunken luck he merely bounced off it without feeling the impact. Somehow he caught his step again. Now the slanted streets of Ljubljana actually helped him. He was thrust down them as if on a ship’s deck in a storm. Through the darkness and narrow streaks of moonlight and the pitch blackness, further and further down the hill.

He was out of breath. Gasping. Spitting. Emboldening himself. Swearing. Sometimes in rhymes. Overcome by exhaustion, if he were to hit hard against something, he would merely slump to the ground and give up. But the town was thrusting him here and there like children playing with a cockroach in a box, so he was no longer brushing against the walls,

merely running forward. Running and stumbling. It didn't matter, as long as she did not get away.

Following his heavy head.

Following the hem of her skirt. Down the hill, further and further down.

After a while – how far had he got? – the cobblestones were replaced by dried out beaten earth. He could no longer hear his footsteps. The darkness here was denser. Bushes scratched his hands as he tried to move forward. He still only glimpsed the hem of her skirt. Still only in the corner of his eye.

Then the rustling that was filling his head was suddenly interrupted by the brassy ringing of bells. He paused for a while in the middle of a clearing, all of a sudden sobered up. It felt as if he had stopped, would no longer be able to move. He knew these bells. Somewhere above him, the Trnovo Church was making itself heard. He felt cheated.

This was enough. No more running further down the hill.

But this was just a moment. With the town toppled, his feet would compulsively not leave him be, and here there was nothing else to grab hold of.

And just as well he hadn't given up because, all of a sudden, he spotted her skirt right in front of him. He almost stepped onto it. It surprised him, made him jump. Half a step in front of him. Or was he already stepping on it?

The ringing stopped and the humming returned, louder and more persistent than before, also coming from outside, tuning in with the buzzing inside his head.

Again he crashed into something. This was the first time it truly hurt. His knee had hit something hard and round.

Ringing again? Had it not only just stopped? He could hear a rolling racket and a sharp bang that were then drowned out by the buzzing. Was all this noise coming from somewhere inside him?

He tried to keep his eyes open. They felt as if they were falling out of his heavy head that was pushing him on and at the same time rhythmically swaying as he staggered.

Now he could see that the skirt was green. A washed out brownish green. And he was no longer staggering but sliding on it.

Sliding down, further down on the green skirt.

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All of a sudden it was no longer a hum but a rumble. He was unable to differentiate between what was within and what external. Although he finally managed to keep his eyes open, he could see nothing but green. A dirty light green with dark, floating stains. Instinctively he opened his mouth, gasping for air. Instead the tepid, slimy water gushed into him, instantly paralysing him with its live, warm weight. He surrendered to it immediately. He had had enough, tired of running around, chasing after her, playing games. The effort was getting to him. The guilt. He gave in to the muffled noise and the weight.

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The vortex slowly turned him. He saw something white and round in front of him. He could no longer see the skirt. It was never there. It was an illusion.

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Floating from beyond the final corner of awareness came the palm of her hand. Green like her skirt. The long grass-like fingers carried by the current gave the impression she was playfully waving at him. Inviting him to touch her. As if she was trying to relate to him that it was not over yet, that she was not finished with him.

At first he didn't want to.

Then, all of a sudden, without any conscious thought, he moved, kicked his legs, reached towards the fingers and grabbed hold of them. To his surprise, he realised he had not reached into the emptiness of the water, that there really was something there.

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He held her by the hand, playfully undulating with her as if they were dancing. The darkness lured him further, deeper and deeper, down and inside, through the nose and mouth. Eventually so much of it had gathered inside him that it solidified into emptiness.

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He was awoken with a strong kick into the stomach. This wasn't the first time in his long life. A kick and a flash of light. They drove out the stinking water from his mouth and nose. Probably not just water. He rasped, gasping for air. Spat and vomited. Oozing all over, he tried to keep his eyes open long enough to see where he was. But the flashes were too bright. Something was preventing him from turning to one side and continuing his sleep.

'Just a bit more, Kat, just a bit more,' he whimpered as he continued to wheeze.

In response, he received another kick in the stomach, spitting liquid once again. Something was seriously wrong. This was not a normal morning. He was not in his own bed. However poor, his bed was not as hard as this. And he still could not turn around.

Green skirt, green fingers…

Eventually he somehow managed to move enough to hide his face from the light. This way he could slowly and cautiously open his eyes, getting used to the brightness, while still attempting to breathe properly.

First he noticed the people standing higher up on the embankment, staring at him tight-lipped, wide-eyed. The stern faces of the burghers of Ljubljana on their way to church to confess their petty sins. Once again they are being given something they can frown upon when they sit down for Sunday lunch after Mass.

'And, bon appétit!' he blurted.

Then he turned to see where the shadow he had moved into was coming from. All of a sudden, the shadow thickened into a form.

Leaning over him was a moustachioed watchman, getting ready to 'poke him' again with his heavy boot. This too was a familiar scene to him. Just a little more, and he will breathe a sigh of relief.

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He wanted to move out of the way, get up from the ground or at least roll to one side, but he simply couldn't. It wasn't possible because he was unable to pull his right hand over towards himself.

He turned his impossibly heavy head to see where it had got stuck.

The green hand.

He gulped down the liquid he had been about to spit out. He could not turn around because his fingers were entangled with the fraying fingers of a woman's hand. The hand that was attached to the cold copper-green body next to which he was lying.

Legs spread and the belly softly inflated, as if she were going to give birth to the river. A bruised, mangled neck and a battered head with black, protruding lips. What had initially seemed like rotting pieces of cloth, remnants of a green dress hanging from her in shreds, was in fact her skin, peeling, tearing away from her body. Beneath, it revealed blackened and white flesh.

Her head was lovingly turned towards him. Knotted hair tangled with twigs and river grass. She stared at him, one open bulging fish-like eye, in place of her left a rotting hole oozing slimy water.

With this one, she saw straight into him.

It only took a moment. He gulped on what he had almost thrown up. Groaned something incomprehensible. He wanted to pull himself away, jump up, but all he did was shudder, still holding her by the hand, their fingers still entangled. He could not pull her closer to him. She was clinging on to him.

Staring at him. With an eye and a hole.

He took a deep breath in order to scream properly.

The following moment the watchman finally carried out his intention, relieving him. His kick hit his hip, shaking him with immense pain. He fell into that rotten hole.

Sunday, 21 June 1835

Chapter 1

'What's up, Doc?'

There was something intricately ugly, unkempt and mannishly hirsute pushing at him and it wasn't his sister.

It forced him to rouse instantly, the inevitable consequence of this was that he felt like vomiting. Despite gulping, a brief dribble escaped his mouth. He tried to turn away from

the stench of alcohol, soured milk and rotting tobacco that was coming from the old man's mouth, but all he could do was push himself up against the wall with his back.

He was lying in the corner of an empty, dim, surprisingly clean room. Four walls, a wooden bench, a narrow slit with a beam of light coming through it, and a heavy metal door. Him and the old man, nothing else. Though he, surprisingly, had never ended up here before, he instantly knew that he was in one the cells in the castle that the watchmen used as a detention centre and prison.

The pain clearly needed a little longer to awaken but when it did so, it once again engulfed him entirely. He had never handled it well, now it caused him to wail like an animal – as if his soul was leaving him. It almost did. His ribs turned inwards, it felt as if he was being bloated with air from inside. He felt he was being crushed and might explode simultaneously.

Anyone seeing him for the first time would probably gain a rather bad impression about the Ljubljana watchmen. But the truth was that the Doctor looked just as bad almost every Sunday morning, even if he woke up in his own bed. Pale, with a grazed face that he fortunately didn't need to shave often. Between his thick unruly eyebrows and puffy cheeks below, his tiny eyes, watery due to perpetual sleeplessness, seemed sunken inside his skull. His otherwise slender, always moist lips were somewhat tainted by the fact that the upper protruded slightly over the lower, as if he had been idly biting away at it. Long hair, greasy, matted, losing some of its waviness and turning grey from the smoke, the dampness, and the Ljubljana fog.

His clothing was not much better. He was wearing a faded black tailcoat, stained on the inside, threadbare at the elbows. Black trousers, worn thin at the knees. After all, befitting a romantic poet. He excused his worn, misshapen boots by claiming one of his legs was shorter than the other, though he never managed to prove this. He always looked crumpled, often rolling into bed fully clothed. His stomach always bloated. This time it was water, on most other occasions wine. Though the difference between water and wine in many a Ljubljana joint was of a mostly rhetorical nature.

Of course all this does not mean that anyone waking up in a cold cell belonging to the Ljubljana watchmen does not have any other worries beyond whether they look decent and tidy when they will be beaten. For now, the Doctor merely tried to stay still, breathing as shallowly as possible, trying not to look around or move, waiting to die peacefully.

He pulled himself up into a sitting position. At least the stone wall behind him was pleasantly cool. He peeled his trousers away from his skin and on his right side pulled them down far enough to inspect the painful rainbow bruise on his hip that he preferred not to touch. What was he doing yesterday?

The old man moved away and sat on the bench at the far end of the cell, but even this was far too close. It did, however, help a little. Though he was able to determine that the man's stinking breath was like the scent of dewy flowers compared to the stench he himself was emitting. Stale alcohol sweat, human excrement, piss and dead fish. This was, without doubt, the smell of the river, but what he could not understand was why he seemed to be steeped in it.

There was a metallic taste in his mouth. He spat on the floor and the bloody phlegm joined the dried up star-shaped stain that indicated where his cheek had been lying before. This at least explained why he had the feeling his face had shrunk and he can no longer use it properly.

Who had hit him?

The fog inside his head had yet to clear entirely.

He recalled Andrej and his continuous toasts, Kastelic's constantly interfering nose; he remembered how they danced and sang, if singing is what you could call it.

Slowly and carefully he rose slightly, straightened up. Unfortunately, despite everything, it seemed as if he was going to survive this.

From his pocket he produced a handkerchief, damp and stinking like everything else on him. He wiped himself around the mouth, rubbed the dried-up blood from his cheeks and blew his nose.

The old man was staring at him intently, clearly expecting something. Everything on this person seemed to be hanging off, most of all his lower jaw and his long veiny arms. At the sight of his equally long fingers, the Doctor flinched uncomfortably, but before he had a chance to consider this image thoroughly, the old man's patience was suddenly over.

'And wha' wassit you did so thuh Devil 'imself came to getcha?' he whispered dramatically, like a master complaining to a servant about his wife.

He wanted to respond but all he managed was a wheeze. Tried to grasp a thought but the image callously caught up with him.

The sunken purple-black blotches on the knotted neck. The bloated belly and the skin, hanging from her in shreds. The empty eye socket looking at him. The broken fingers on the scratched hand. The one he held tightly.

The sweet, wet, rotting smell…

'What did I do?' Flashing before him with the image was the memory of that morning on the riverbank at Krakovo. 'What *did* I do…?'

'Jesus, Doc! D'ya get so pissed again, you don't remembah, haha? Nah, that won't be good, not good at all.'

He tried to sober up and sort out his thoughts. Toasts, Andrej, poking noses… the skirt?'

'I was in Inferno…'

Here he got stuck, which wasn't too unusual. Usually all his Saturday memories ended there at the tavern called Inferno. And those of the occasional other day too, if he was being entirely honest. But on those occasions his drinking friends would drag him home. He did not wander around like a sleepwalker.

Once again from the start. Last night he was in Inferno... He wanted to go home. At last he had thought of a solution for the final quatrain of the introduction that he had been trying to figure out for such a long time. He was worried he might forget it, though this had never happened to him before. He stepped out to get some fresh air and realised he was a lot worse for wear than he had thought. Then he saw or met someone…

And then it was suddenly morning when he woke up on the riverbank with the watchman standing over him, hand in hand with… He shuddered.

'So, ya went to Hell and now thuh Devil's come to getcha, ha ha! Did that Podboj woman at the inn close ya tab, an' t'Devil's come to claim all ya've squandered on booze?' the old man was amused the way an Upper Carniolan farmer is amused when his cow drops dead the moment the bailiffs have come to seize it.

He wasn't listening. For a few moments he could not hear anything at all. There was a gap in his memory, something that, despite everything, was not something that happened to him normally. He always recalled at least something. Images, people, shadows. He can now also clearly recall that solution he had found. *For six months the bloody river swamps the ground*… Why did he not know how he got from Inferno to the riverbank? It was a

distance he would not be entirely happy to cover even when he was sober. What was he doing there? Why did he not know how come he ended up there the following morning with a body next to him? Who was the unfortunate woman? What had happened to her?

The hollow eye was staring at him.

The old man suddenly jumped up from the bench and once again sat right next to him. He was agile and tough, only made old by hard work and a hard life.

'But what can ya, Doc, when he ain't that kind a divil,' he whispered through his rotten teeth and stirred him from his thoughts.

'What kind?' He tried to concentrate and follow what the old man was telling him. All of a sudden it seemed as if, despite everything, it could be important.

'The kind that would demand summit you can still return.'

Slowly he was coming to. Or at least he began to concentrate on what was before him. Which did not mean that he understood much more than he had done before.

'Believe me, I can also never return to Mrs Podboj what I squandered on drink at her inn.'

The old man looked at him sideways as if to remind him that this really isn't a time for jokes. But he continued grinning.

'T's the Viennese Devil' he winked at him. 'From a Hell just for Carniolans.'

'A Viennese Devil? Didn't know there was more than one?'

'Viennese, oh yeah, Viennese,' he spat out something brown that merged with the other stains on the floor. 'May me woman's throat dry up if it ain't true. I was there when they took Baron Tauffer away. Was still a kid, looked after 'is pots.'

'Baron…'

'They were just like this. Dark Viennese devils. And if one of them has now come to get you, Doc… then the Lord 'as not 'ad mercy on ya sinful soul.'

'Baron Tauffer? Hang on… Taufferer.' He tried to remember why the name sounded so familiar to him. Baron Taufferer. Janez, noble Taufferer.

'You really know nowt about this? Surely he didn't come to getcha 'cause of some young maiden?'

‘Young maiden…?’

He got no further than playing echo to the old man’s words when the man suddenly jumped up again as if something had stung him in the back. Once again he spat on the floor, skilfully aiming at the previous stain, then he stood by the narrow slit, as far away from the door as he could get.

‘What’s go…?’

At that moment the door to the cell flung open as if they had wanted to catch them doing something forbidden. A watchman marched in, jingling his bunch of keys, a broad smile on his face. He too had a moustache. All watchmen in Ljubljana had moustaches, so they could twirl on it as they told you they cannot help you at all with whatever problem you happened to have.

The old man was visibly relieved, which probably meant they were not in the presence of the Viennese servant of Hell. He turned to the Doctor.

‘If you get hung, will ya at least leave me your nice coat, Doc? The wife will wash it for me.’

‘Get away!’ The watchman lifted his hand but then walked straight past the old man towards the Doctor.

‘For you, you Viennese toad, I have this,’ the old man turned his back towards the policeman, bent over and farted loudly. ‘Some southern wind!’

Mid-stepped, the watchman turned and kicked towards him but the old man had already jumped away, giggling as if he was being tickled. Now the watchman grinned even more, as if they were rehearsing for some village pantomime and the Doctor had forgotten his words.

The watchman turned towards the Doctor who was trying to raise himself up from the ground. Impatiently he grabbed him by the elbow, pulled him up, placing him onto his feet like a tin soldier.

‘Thank you, dear officer…’

The watchman was not listening, just tightened his grip, turned him towards the door and pulled him out.

As he was being dragged along, the old man shouted at the Doctor, '*Anyone with a dick hanging pretty, don't be going to the Imperial City, 'cos girls there go all mad, when poked by a Carniolan lad…*' and something else but the door had already closed behind them.

Chapter 2

The space the watchman had dragged him to was as cold as the cell down below. Not because it was not nicely furnished. The Doctor guessed it was probably the chief's office, the Biedermeier details on the furniture probably not intended for the people watchmen brought to the castle. Also not cold because outside the summer had come to a sudden end. What made it chilling was the dead cold eyes of the person sitting at the large desk, feet up, smoking a pipe. As soon as the Doctor stepped through the doorway, he smiled and jumped up.

He moved with ease, softly, the smile not disappearing for a moment from his face, but his eyes remained fixed and haunting, even when he was looking towards him. As if they didn't belong to this body, as if there was someone else peering through them. If this is what devils are like, then the depths of Hell must indeed be icy, as already reported by Dante.

For there was no doubt in his mind that before him was one of the clearly infamous Viennese devils the old man had warned him about. A strict military haircut, a tiny, neat moustache cramped under his nose, his high forehead and his entire deathly face only slightly less shiny than his eyes – obviously powdered but had also not often been exposed to the sun. Probably because he spent his days staring into the dark holes people had instead of souls. The whiteness of his skin was further accentuated by the fact he was entirely dressed in black. Even his shirt was black, his overcoat made from a very black fabric the Doctor was unfamiliar with. He guessed it must be the latest fashion in Vienna. It was so black it seemed to scream at him.

His clothes fitted him with such perfection they must have been woven on him by innocent Galician virgins at full moon. And he wore them with befitting casualness. After the guard more or less dragged him up all the stairs and down all the corridors in the castle, almost killing him with exhaustion, the thick scent of the Viennese official's pomade and perfumes in the tiny space made the Doctor feel he was about to choke. The smell of the

man's pipe could not break through the heavy air; in fact, it didn't even seem to be lit. This was a man who did not put up with pettiness but was impossibly and harshly petty himself.

'Doctor, isn't it? Sit down, do sit down.'

He extended his hand and the Doctor shook it weakly, but then the 'divil' somehow managed to twist his palm, squeeze it firmly and then tried to twist it again. For a while they stood there, hand in hand, staring at each other. The Doctor had had enough of physical contact with strangers for the day, so eventually he slowly withdrew his hand.

The Viennese indicated the chair at the large heavy desk, then dismissed the watchman who vanished in an instant, though the door behind him closed very carefully and softly. The Devil hopped off towards his throne, still casually and lightly, almost as if he were some kind of puppet.

He spoke fluent Carniolan, corrupted only by his guttural Rs. But considering how people in Ljubljana spoiled the language, this was a minor flaw. His voice, a rather high, unpleasant tenor, wouldn't fit in even with a choir.

The Doctor sat down carefully as his entire body still ached. He sensed his dirty coat staining the velvet upholstery of the chair. Miserably he kept shuffling in the seat as if uncomfortable, and he couldn't do much else.

'Allow me to explain,' he began. 'There has been a series of unfortunate circumstances. This misunderstanding or accident, Sir, this fate…?'

'*Hateful fate, never again shall I speak, ill of you and everything you have in store, I am, thank God, well-seasoned in grief and more, the suff'ring you bring to life, so dark and bleak!*' The Viennese was waving his hands about as if conducting an orchestra, grinning proudly as if reciting one of the Doctor's poems was his greatest achievement after learning how to speak.

The Doctor wasn't entirely sure how to respond. Ever since waking up he had the felt that everything was still part of some dream.

The Devil stared at him, mouth open, eyes fixed, and waited.

'Certainly, mister…?' the Doctor stuttered.

'Yes?' the man stuck the pipe back into his mouth, still slightly open.

'I am trying to politely enquire how may I address you.'

‘You can address me with… Wirt. Herr Wirt, Doctor.’

The Doctor stared at him. He didn’t understand why this man made him so nervous, but he did. His grinning, constant waving of the hands, shifting, twitching. He was like a storm. But right in the middle of this storm two fixed points – his eyes, trying to nail him to his seat or even hypnotise him. The Doctor shuffled uncomfortably in his seat again.

‘Herr Wirt…’

‘*That he says, and they turned faster and faster, dancing further and further away from the floor, on the bank of the river they span thrice more, spinning into the waves, they jumped from the shore. On the water boatmen saw a swirl, and then, nobody ever saw young Urška again*.’ The man really was like an actor whose approach is to pronounce every word with their entire body, to show to the mob the importance of what they are saying.

The Doctor waited for him to finish and twice cleared his throat to see whether he would finally allow him to speak.

‘Herr Wirt…’

‘That’s also one of yours, isn’t it, dear Doctor? Der Wassermann. The Water Sprite.’ He pronounced the German in his own particular melodic way but a little harsher than his Carniolan.

‘I am honoured that you know so much about me and my work, Herr Wirt.’ And especially worried, he thought to himself. ‘I can’t believe that you read all this and even learned it off by heart.’

‘The honour is probably mine, Doctor…’

‘Please, no…’

‘*Life, a jail, and crime in it a cruel executioner*.’

‘Crime? No – time.’

‘What? Time? *Die Zeit*?’

‘It doesn’t matter, Herr.’

‘Of course it matters. That makes much more sense. Time, indeed time is a cruel executioner. That’s right. Especially if one is in jail. Actual jail, unpoetic, unmetaphorical.

Real, solid, damp and cold jail. If someone happens to be in there for necrophilia, for example.'

The Doctor shrugged his shoulders desperately. By now he knew very well that he needed to wait for a longer silence before he could speak.

'I know that all this probably does not make sense, Herr Wirt. But I am unable to explain how I ended up in the morning with that…' he shuddered. 'Well, I can't explain what happened. And believe me, this surprised me more than you might think. But I am certainly not…'

That eye.

'You noticed a body in the river, heroically jumped into the water to recover it, and the effort caused you to faint?'

'Well… Perhaps it is not that difficult to explain.'

'Is this your official statement, Doctor?'

'I admit, Herr, that I cannot recall how exactly I ended up on the riverbank, but even so, I am certain I didn't… Perhaps I saw her drowning, like you've said.'

Wirt straightened his hair that did not in any way indicate it needed his intervention. His eyes stayed on the Doctor and the Doctor didn't dare look away. He thought doing so might be understood as an admission of guilt. So he defiantly stared back. Wirt slowly, lazily smiled. Smiled *more* than he had been already smiling.

'If she was waving at you or calling you from the afterlife, perhaps. Perhaps your trained poetic ear heard her silent cries. Cries for justice. That is what you believe in, isn't it? You poets? That you hear things other people don't? From the great beyond?'

'I don't understand, Herr…'

'But the splash certainly didn't come from this young lady. She was in the water for at least two weeks, more specifically, seventeen days at most.'

The Doctor tried to process the information. Of course the Viennese man was right. A body in that state must have been in the water for a while. Peeling skin like disintegrating paper, her green complexion… Had he imagined it or was her body covered in tiny bite marks? He could still see her clearly before his eyes. As if she is within reach.

‘So, do you remember what you were doing seventeen days ago?’

This confused the Doctor as he tried to rid his mind of the image of the dead woman and understand what the man was asking him. What he was actually asking him.

…