

EXTRACTS #2 (PAUL BECKER)

Real?

Real, definitely real I think. Don't you think? By a great river. Perhaps even an island, in the middle of the Volga or the Mississippi. No, not a river, more like a great lake. A vast lake in the summer time, picture it. Baikal or Superior. So they are exploring the tunnels, her sister has taken a torch from the kitchen and they had both hurried to the entrance with new excitement. They enter. She feels enervated. Any sound of birdsong quickly dies away or becomes muffled as they descend the rotten steps into the first of the tunnels, climbing carefully over the great piles of rubbish near the door. They have never been so far in, never so deeply into the dark. They had always feared the tunnel up until this moment. She is feeling unsure about what has changed between them and what has suddenly emboldened them, given them the courage to move further in.

What can they see? What is it we can see that they can see?

For the moment, nothing, then the gloom lifts a little, only slightly. They are looking down the length of a corridor that appears to be roughly hewn from the clay and has no end, only a black hole where the lamplight cannot penetrate. The floor is made up of broad slats of birchwood. They move further in. The first rooms have obviously been used for storage. Her sister leads on into the tunnel, the torchlight picking out shadows. The dead silence grows more intense, an entombment, all that can be heard is the soft roar of the blood being

pumped from their hearts, through their veins. Each room is clouded with damp and stinks of rotten grain. Rats whose eyes twinkle from every corner pit-a-pat over their shoes, squealing in terror. Slowly they start to see better. The dark shadows of empty grain bins in some rooms, woodpiles in others. In a larger space, a set of shelves filled with pottery and the remains of a kiln. She picks up what looks like a rock from a table but looking much closer she realises it is a tiny figurine, a crudely modelled statuette of a boy and a much taller, protective dog. They have gone too far, perhaps rounded one or two corners because suddenly they both look back at the same moment and can no longer see any light. Let's go back, she says. Nonsense, says her sister, dragging her further in. She pulls back her arm and the sister drops the torch which goes out and then both of them panic, her sister runs past her fleeing back the way she thinks they came and she runs after the sound of her sister's steps, knocks her head hard against a supporting beam. The sister reaches the entrance a moment later and shouts her name back into the darkness, hearing nothing, she runs back to the house to fetch another light. As she lies half-conscious in the dark, she reaches out and her hand grasps the tiny figurine; she feels the weight of it in her hand, holds its gravity. She imagines that it is growing and growing until she can no longer hold it and eventually the light changes. Something fades and something comes much more into focus, and the figurine is now a large sculpture, meters high, set on a marble base, a transformation, the figurine is transformed into the central feature of a beautiful garden. Now there should be the much louder sound of birdsong. We continue moving, almost floating

backwards, always backwards, in a circle, back through the garden and the large sculpture and reversing slowly back in through the French windows of the house into a room containing nothing but a single spotlit photograph of an African mask at the edge of a wall, a fetish of some sort, studded with hundreds of nails. Then for the first time, we turn now and are able to see a chandelier, an ornate one, the kind that might be seen in a Greek Orthodox church. This we are viewing through a set of glass doors we move towards. The doors open miraculously one after another as our eyes float through the space, past and beyond the chandelier and looks up towards a high window filled with stalks of golden foliage: a garden in the afternoon of a late summer. We can see the garden from below but cannot enter as the window is too high up on the wall. We pass out of that space and up some internal steps to look out onto or down into a different space altogether.