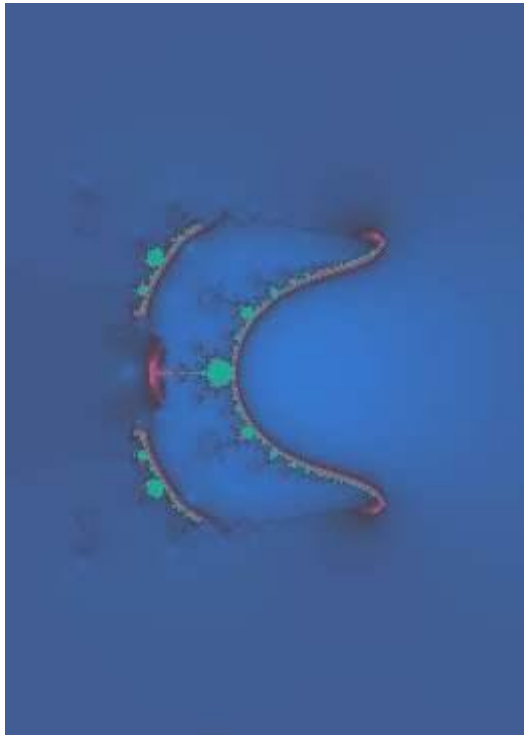


Stephen's Lake

(a novel in parts)



Gregory Vincent St. Thomasino

xPress(ed)

Stephen's Lake (a novel in parts) by Gregory Vincent St. Thomasino

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“Der Fall Stephen”

Route 27 stretches E. and W. Along its southern wayside lies a waste of sandy lot jostled through with Queen Anne’s Lace. A tall wrought-iron railing marks a boundary for the Lutheran cemetery which keeps to the road for a quarter mile. The morning traffic comes and goes infrequently then towards noon the road is packed with vehicles. When the weather is fair and the sand is heavy, the earth-warmed air reflects the sky so as to be a rippling silver ocean. This causes the vehicles to pause. The drivers exit their cabs, raise a palm to their foreheads and wonder how real it is—then drive on into it.

In the cemetery the stones are mossed and forgotten. The rails are chapped and peeling.

Beyond the farthermost boundary is a schoolhouse. Through its tall trim windows begabled with broken pediments a class of kindergartners is joining a circle to play an exercise. One child is refusing to join in. The teacher is scolding him. She cites his failed attempts at penmanship. She leads him to a chair beside a window.

Stephen's Idyll

The boy, let out to the garden stood in a puddle left
by the rainfall He looked down to his feet and
there he found his reflection gazing up at him And
then he saw the sun's reflection shimmering there
beside his own He raised his eyes and with his
palm above his brow he studied the yellow disc as
it was amid the great blue space His skin was
warmed He closed his eyes and placed his palm
atop his head feeling the warmth absorbed by his hair
Now a breeze traveled by thick with the various
spices of the garden Never before had he the
pleasure of enjoying the aromas so freely Sensing
them so made him sigh and he opened his eyes
For a moment he thought he would see the aromas
and imagined them a likeness to the rainbow The
ground was puddly From puddle to puddle he
went standing in each and seeing in each
reflection the sun shimmering beside his image

Stephen's Lake

One

His first sleep was broken with adolescent voice:

Rise, rise from below the open window, fill the
sleepy ear, elicit in that memory your image.

It was her child's voice.

A still sunlight shone softly the bare wood wall,
rosewood bureau, cane chair upon which lay his
glasses.

Among so many books amassed unconsciously,
thin threads netting dust suspended illumined.

A dulcet splash elicited an image: *a shallow,
petalstrewn pool.*

He rose before the open window. He found her
eyes awaiting his: she lowered hers.

He considered himself—standing naked before
the open window:

How much of my body was she able to perceive?

He let his fingers through his hair, let his smooth
palm over the curvature of his abdomen, let his
narrow fingers through the thicket above his pubis.

Two

Taking up her file, the mother turned for another room. She placed a tape of de Hartmann into play and reclining began fashioning her fingernails, so capably, as but a life of habit could achieve. Now de Hartmann played, a hesitant, evolving resolution, fit to entrance and deliver, delight the body into serial movements. She heard his footsteps, the creaking of the floorboards above.

—Stephen?

He loved her this way, as she gestures with her file, or, more concertedly, with her eyes.

He let a fingertip to beneath her eye and gently palmed her nape, and as he held her forward she parted her thighs and held him to her breast.

She saw, beyond his boyish countenance, an inner strength which had yet to be exerted. She saw other men, but only bodies—no voices, no personalities. She saw her ailing mother, and father long passed on. She saw her child—that gorgeous face, flaming hair given to the wind.

He held his head upon her breast, the pattern cool to his warm face. He kissed above her heart, the scent of her perfume. He brought his palm to just above her breast. He kissed her chin. He kissed beside her mouth. She kissed his forehead. She

touched her lips to his mouth and pressed his head to
her breast.

—And I know you, Stephen, she whispered. I've
known you all my life.

Three

Inside the water a yellow disc fell calm amid blue
space. Restless, in the encircling pine, cicadae sang.

She found herself surrounded:

Within a giant crown—was tipped by reaching
pine asway like angel wing. Has he placed amiss his
crown, him off to bathe in yon brown lake? But see,
he returns!

She stared into the pool.

The petals became still again.

Four

Alone to muse, a canvas chaise beside the shallow,
petalstrewn pool, his tablet at lap, a pen at hand,
Stephen lay.

A note for someone far?

Or:

Has the wind reversed its course?

*And after loving,
we say nothing.
Only our sounds,
the bodies relaxing.
There is no sign of affection.*

He scrutinized the broad pine trees: sketching them in his mind, he seduced them into feathers, poplar, transparency—but for other pine, farther on.

He cringed in servility to his ideal.

Five

The Italian sports car, its brake engaged slid some inches on the driveway gravel before halting in its place beneath the portecochere Reaching to the cupboard's upmost shelf the girl withdrew glass tumblers Clouds were gathering wisps of glistening cirrus halted high above like monitors sensing no resistance, they summoned their brothers the cumulus they arrived, arrived increasing their number then seemingly cumbersome they hovered waiting pondered a bumbling

Yet unspoken, yet unseen, the girl stole notice of his features:

The wavy hair.

The delicately shaped ear.

The golden rim to his glasses.

Seeing sidewise through his lens observed how all appeared oblongish, oblique.

—There's a lake.

—Where?

—Beyond the garden.

—Beyond the pine?

—There's a boathouse.

At their feet, traces of a path—slabs of slate long fractured into bits.

The lakeside seemed skirted in fur.

The girl reached her arms as though to take the lake with an embrace—its entire circumference fit within her reach.

He thought that she, perhaps, wished to hold him in her arms.

—Over there! A landing!

It was of wood, ocher and parched: stepping onto it, it swayed, dipping an edge, then it rose of its own buoyancy. Then submerged at its side, save for a tip of bow, a rowboat—its oars locked yet in their oarlocks.

—This morning I heard you singing outside my window. Actually I'd been awakened for some time, I could not sleep beyond my dreams. Hearing your voice I could not help but to see you again as you were last autumn in Italy: I'd only completed my chore when I left the rooms for some sunshine before lunch. I'd only begun to near that terrible fountain when I realized it did not seem as turbulent and booming as I had found it to be the day before. Hardly so, this time I found it to be whispering. Whispering inwardly. Yet I felt welcomed, approaching this intimacy. Then I discern, above the spray, a tender voice singing fragments of a melody. How familiar this melody seemed! I began slowly toward it, and I recognized it was yours: You were sitting close to the spray. Your hair was awreathed in the mist. I sat a short distance behind you, and I listened, and I waited.

The lake reflected nothing.

The landing throbbed imparting cadence to the lake.

Her voice began once more that simple melody, as Stephen saw her clothing fall away, how she with celebration disappeared into the lake.

Seven

Candles burned, dripping in their scone. The flames
glared across a photograph.

—Father.

He, with pointer, stands before a class of
children.

She touched the frame, leaving it aslant.

—Father.

Her portfolio:

Interiors with covered fixtures.

Sea views.

Portraits.

A charcoal nude.

—Stephen!

—I've been feeling tremors.

—When I hold you I am solacing a child, a child
who sculpts his thoughts into beauty, yet so pliant are
these thoughts, he cannot be done with them.

Eight

A jet of damp air passed. Before the open window, he
knew the maple floorboards ret with rain.

*Yet so pliant are these thoughts,
he cannot be done with them.*

Soon the woman's voicing ceased.

Flutter!

Splash!

He traced it to above the dark, depthless pool where his ears took a bobbing at the surface, his eyes movements of silhouettes dipping and ascending.

—Forgive me, Stephen.

Her eyes followed the contour and pulsation of his naked silhouette.

Nine

He thought he perceived about her a phosphorescing as he reached his hand to touch her shoulder. He felt his hand reached through her, or did not reach her at all.

—The tremors!

—We are high up! The mountain's peak!

She leaned aside her head, and slow, with lifting arms, began a low continuous drone. Teetering at pool's edge, exhaling and rebreathing her own vaporized breath, she whirred, whirled.

He juttet for her. From within the black, steeped
pine, silhouettes dipped after him.

—The tremors!

Leave me!

With fingertips he cleared her face of hair and
kissed her forehead.

Leave me!

Ten

He drew the blanket to his chin, opening his eyes to
realize not the blanket, but the woman's robe, instead.

—Stephen!

With cupped hand she skimmed the petaled
surface.

—Stephen!

Ripples on the water let it seem in motion:

A black seam—the length of the pool!

A fissure?

—It's a fissure!

The tremors!

—I suppose.

With cupped hand he skimmed the petaled surface. Submerged, he heard the woman utter: indecipherable. To the fracture he reached: he fit his fingers into it.

A siphon!

Eleven

To his lips he held a bit of pear, but could not savor.

The pool has emptied!

Twelve

About them midday played its sheer luxury. The woman recited couplets. She carved apples and pears.

—Stephen?

His face: at once it countenanced haughtiness and strength, the bearer of obsidian.

The woman recited couplets. She carved apples
and pears.

Coda

At their feet, traces of a path slabs of slate long
fractured into bits Carpeted, then, by bristle leaf
dusty cone, pressed by the day the lakeside seemed
skirted in fur And how her hair kept its brilliant *red*
despite cumulative clouds, mining the sunlight The
lake the color of the pine tar the landing that of the
trunks And as he aimed his eyes for what awaited
them, she took him with an embrace He saw into
her eyes to welcome what he knew would be their
first confiding She threw back her hair eyes
pitched at gray zenith a tear streaking her temple
He kissed her neck and felt his cheek toward her tear
it was warm and soft and inside him The lake
reflected nothing The landing throbbed, imparting
cadence to the lake She passed into that subtle
surface where they kissed, eyes pressing closed
as the water swirled and eddied, as dim circularities
arose beneath to pillow their embrace letting fathom
after fathom pass as the lake rose from its basin, rose
above its shore, above the reaching pine to where it
hovered among clouds A warm, sunny twilight
filled the basin Clasp hands, both gathered into
ken inhabitants long drawn from an initial berth
Wrecked oars Gone tools Gnarl and clenching

bough once gasping for air Now petrified trunk
Now petrified limb stump The water swirled and
edded, thrusting them afloat Rain burst down
upon them They held, treading seeing all in
wiling disarray

Marginalia

It was her child's voice.

Follow concert nature.... With all swan's grace
the voice then dove head first. A shallow,
petalstrewn pool. The dulcet splash elicited an
image....

They were attracted, held fast, she lowered hers.

She rose from the pool, reclined towelless
beneath upon the warm concrete embankment. She
closed her eyes....

He dressed into madras trunks, a worn black
polo shirt....

Now she knew her happiness, sorely won
although it be.... August vacationer...and Stephen
awaking in the guest room.

...these did not suit her taste which, albeit quite
eclectic, inclined toward Eastern thinkers, esoterica....

—We're coming to...I expect....

A pattern of writhing leaves made it a torture for him to behold....

He raised his cup and, feeling nearly recovered, made his way into another room.

—I'm sorry to have kept you so late. Did you get enough sleep?

He saw the pool, and at its farther side her daughter napping in the sun.

—You interest me entirely.

He recalled a prior time she held him in her arms, but it was just that and nothing more.... He could not lead her further, and she would not seduce him....

This movement unfastened her robe, it fell to one side. Beneath she wore a chiffon bodysuit fastened twice, at her breast, and then above her navel. She lowered her eyes and withdrew into her body.

I know you, he thought to whisper....

Stephen fascinated the girl, next repelled her. With his polite, respectful words she could do nothing. And should he walk from their lives, never to return, she would not fret, she would not miss him. Yet should he remain, she would become inured to his presence, eventually.

She tapped upon the glass...

Wrapping her hair into the towel, the mother
asked, *Did the cicadas wake you?*

The girl stared into the pool. The petals became
still again.

—No.

*take a peep inside the pane
& watch the little spider playin'*

...notes that whirled, danced mysteriously.

A canvas chaise, set beside the shallow,
petalstrewn pool....

But truly, this mood, not for letters....

The pencil slipped from his fingers, struck the
concrete ground, acquired momentum and rolled
over the edge into the pool. It sank a short depth then
ascended, floated aimlessly with slight track of
wave....

And yet he could imagine tenderness, between
that teacher and the child....

That child, I...

Belligerence arose inside him, crippling indignation, trepidation, in view of what had come to be his past....

The tablet slipped off his lap, struck the concrete ground, bruised at its edge of impact....

He cringed in servility to his ideal.

Mother and daughter escaped the hot cab, pulled from the trunk a carton of groceries and a leather sack of wines and water....

She found the chaise unoccupied. The girl kneeled, and slowly, gathered up his books and papers....

Beginning toward the house, her eyes met with her mother's...and not either thought a smile....

Outside his room she paused and, for reasons not altogether clear to her, turned into her own room and looked inside....

Vacant. Intact.

There he sat in quietude...his back to the door...
Gradually and suddenly, the trepidation had subsided....

And how the subtle modulation of light and shadow, the still, sweet air nearly moist with pine, and the cicadae just outside the open window brought a new and complex intuition. A sentiment arose inside her.... She felt she knew him absolutely, and found him curiously impermanent....

—Beyond the pine? asked he with gesture she should enter, sit upon the chair beside the bureau.

She remained at the doorsill....

—I see it, said the girl toward another slate-laden path.

Here monarchs hovered low, did not seem to heed their presence....

How evident to both that no one, no person had passed this way...for seasons, perhaps....

—But you're always *thinking, writing, sort of*, aren't you?

At that moment she pressed onto a stone, and stumbled. She took his hand....

She, looking to his eyes, and he, to her hand....

And there, amid burst white roses, the garter slept coiled about crooked wood lattice.

Carpeted, then, by bristle leaf, dusty cone
pressed by the day, the lakeside seemed skirted in
fur....

She felt her fingers through her hair....

It's the pine tar....

Together saw the grasses bend, power of the
wind. Sea grasses undulating...water's current. ...of
these trees leaves left their twig, branches their
bough.... *What thievery*, thought Stephen. *Or
displacement, just....*

The flames glared across a photograph....

In it he, with pointer, stands before a classroom
blackboard.

Father.

She placed aside her book, and went to it....

From the curves and shades and shadows, a
composite was formed.

Stephen!

Areas of it had become smudged, such as where her fingers held it. These smudges, she believed, gave unto it an authenticity....

She took upon her lap her sketch box and with charcoal began it anew. She had imagined him entirely....

Stephen!

—I love the storm, he said.

—It doesn't frighten you?

—No.

—Never?

—No.

—I'm not frightened either.

And as they spoke, an air passed through the open window and disrupted the pages on the bed.

The garden, green by day, was black.

That music!

It seemed to him to be with her always.

With fingertips he cleared her face of hair and kissed her lips....

He drew the blanket to his chin, opening his eyes to realize not the blanket, but the woman's robe, instead.

Stepping to the open window, he noticed partial footprints crisscrossed. He stood over one and let his foot into it.

He dressed into his trunks, leaving the robe behind upon the bed.

He rose from the pool, uprighted the overturned chaise.

Her voice weakened. She inhaled deeply, repeatedly. She brought her forearm to rest atop the ridge of her nose, next quickly returned it to her side.

—I ran away. To Europe. To Luxembourg. Then to Italy, where my child was born. I lost my friends. I lost my family. I suppose in a way I was fleeing them too....

She reached into the basket beside the chaise and withdrew a pair of eye pads and a small vessel of lotion and a dropper. Into the vessel she lowered the dropper, drawing in some lotion. Onto each pad she

squeezed some drops. Resting back into the chaise,
she placed the pads over her eyes.

The woman stared into the emptied pool.

Anesthesia. Odor of Putrescence. Before him, an
emptied depression. And the woman—collapsed, her
belly rising and falling unsteadily.

He felt his legs succumb with the force of his
perceptions.

*An emptied depression! And there, before the landing,
a narrow abyss had opened...in it a trunk held vertical by
folds of earth....*

He reached for the trunk, saw in scaly bark
netted strands of hair. He stabbed his arm into the
fold, felt fingers curling over his. The fold let loose a
jet of air...sprinkled his face...blinded him...released
him.

He collapsed, his wide eyes toward the woman,
her belly rising and falling unsteadily....

About them midday played its sheer luxury.

The lake reflected nothing.

Stephen raised his hand, in it was aimed a pistol.
He fired. And again. Into nowhere....