Chapter 16: I walk into the courtyard.

I walk into the courtyard. The giant ginkgo trees rising from the gully block the electric lights in front of the building, turning the leaves stark white. I look around. The cliffs at the back and the sky vanish in the night mist which the lights have turned grey. Only the eaves of the building lit by the lights can be seen. Locked in this strange light, I am overcome by a slight dizziness.

The gate is already shut. I find the latch and open it. Once outside. I am instantly plunged into darkness. A nearby spring gurgles.

I look back after taking a few steps, the lights under the cliff an dim and grey-blue cloudy mists swirl around the mountain peak. Somewhere in the deep gully is the trembling chirping of a cricket. The gurgling of the spring intensifies and subsides. It sounds like the wind, but the wind is threading its way through the gully enshrouded in darkness.

A damp mist spreads over the valley and the trunks of the distant ginkgo trees silhouetted by the light become gentler. It is then that the shape of the mountain gradually manifests itself. I descend into the deep valley embraced by sheer cliffs. Behind the black mountain is a faint glow but all around me a thick darkness gradually closes in.

I look up. Looming high above and looking down menacingly on me is a monstrous black form. I make out the huge head of a bald eagle which protrudes in the middle of it. The wings are folded but it looks as if it is about to take off. I can only hold my breath under the huge talons and wings of this fierce mountain deity.

Further on, I enter the forest of towering metasequoias. I can see nothing at all. The darkness is so palpable that it is a wall and I'm sure if I take another step I'll crash into it. Instinctively, I turn around. Behind, between the shadows of the trees, is the faint glow of the electric lights — a haziness, like a tangled mass of consciousness, like elusive far-away memories. It is as if I am somewhere observing the destination from which I have come. There is no road, the tangled mass of unerased consciousness floats around before my eyes.

I put out my hand to verify my existence, but I can't see it. It is only when I flick my lighter that I see my arm is raised too high, as if I were holding a flame torch. The lighter goes out even though there's no wind. The surrounding darkness becomes even thicker, boundless. Even the intermittent chirping of the autumn insects becomes mute. My ears fill with darkness, primitive darkness. So it was that man came to worship the power of fire, and thus overcame his inner fear of darkness.

I flick my lighter again but the weak dancing flame is immediately extinguished by an invisible, formless wind. In this wild darkness terror ally consumes me, making me lose my belief in myself and my memory of direction. If you go on you will plunge into an abyss, I say to myself. I immediately turn back but I am not on the road. I try taking a few steps. A belt of weak light, like a fence among the trees, appears briefly then vanishes. I discover that I am already in the forest on the left of the road, the road should be on my right. I get my bearings, grope. I should first find that grey-black towering eagle rock.
A sprawling hazy mist hangs like a curtain of smoke to the ground, a few spots of light glimmer in it. I eventually get back to the foot of the oppressive, black, towering eagle rock only to suddenly discover that the grey-white chest in between the two folded wings is like an old woman draped in a cloak. There is no trace of kindness in her and she seems to be a shaman. Her head is bowed and her withered body can be seen under her cloak. At the foot of her cloak kneels a naked woman, and you can feel the gully down her spine. She is down on both knees desperately beseeching the demon in the black cloak. Her hands are clasped so her arms are away from her upper body and her naked torso is even more clearly revealed. Her features can't be seen but the profile of the right side of her face is quite beautiful.

Her long hair falls onto her left shoulder and arm. The front of her body is now clearer. Still on her knees, she is sitting back on her calves, her head bowed: she is a young girl, is utterly terrified, and seems to be praying, pleading. She is constantly transforming. She now reverts to the young woman, the woman with hands clasped in prayer, but as soon as you look away she becomes the young girl again, and the lines of her body are even more beautiful. The curve of the left profile of her breast appears fleetingly, then can no longer be seen.

Once inside the gate, the darkness completely vanishes and I am back in the hazy grey of the electric lights. The leaves left on the old ginkgo trees growing in the gully are devoid of colour in the glow of the lights. Only the illuminated corridor and eaves are clearly defined.

Translated from the Chinese by Mabel Lee