

Venus Blue

SAMPLER

ALSO BY GUSTAF SOBIN

POETRY

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Aura: Last Essays

TRANSLATIONS

Ideograms in China by Henri Michaux
The Brittle Age and Returning Upland by René Char

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Venus Blue

Gustaf Sobin

SAMPLE

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*I wish to express my deepest gratitude to Harris Sobin,
Peter Ansin and Michael Ignatieff for their
continuous support and encouragement.*
G. S.

In loving memory of my mother,
Rena Pearl

SAMPLE

SAMPLER

Part One

(Stefan Hollander, 1989)

SAMPLER

This is Millicent's story, then, rather than mine. It's mine only to the extent that I've preserved what she'd written – jotted down, anxiously – in a tall, black, box-calf journal exactly half a century earlier. I've preserved and, where I could, elaborated on that erratic narrative she'd compiled, amassed out of so many bits and pieces, out of every scrap of hearsay, every unverified, unverifiable rumour that touched upon the presence of that elusive and apparently unqualifiable creature, Molly Lamanna. For Molly, it would seem, was always 'elsewhere'. She was always beyond, or behind, or either side of anything that might possibly be said about her. In Millicent's eyes, she was the essence of myth itself, a modern icon of sorts who'd continually vanish from the very blaze – 'the burning, spike-headed aureole' – that she so unwittingly generated. One might even say that the less substantiated Molly became, the higher, the fiercer that blaze grew. And, in turn, the more consumed, or – in the language of the times – hallucinated Millicent became.

Millicent recorded this 'blaze', this fever, assiduously. Her journal, in fact, might be read as an attempt to control or, at least, contour her own feelings with a kind of breathless verbiage; to shape, through any available image, any scavenged detail, the edgelessness of her own predicament. An earring would do. Or a description of one of Molly's thick, tortoise-shell combs, studded with a burst of blue rhinestones and stuck, at what Millicent might call 'a savage angle', into Molly's high, piled, and now coroneted hair. This, at least, according to Millicent, could be described. This, as least, could be *said*.

Or occasionally she'd glean a phrase, a quote, some cherished utterance of the vanished icon herself. These, immediately, took on all the properties, densities of artefact. They'd emanated out of conversations (heard and overheard), or interviews, or – increasingly out of those very earliest feature articles in magazines such as *Modern Screen* and *Photoplay*

devoted to Molly's 'rapidly rising star'. Hadn't she been quoted, for instance, as saying: 'I'm not altogether certain that being in Hollywood isn't exactly like being anywhere else. I haven't yet noticed differences, *essential* differences, that is.'

Or, when asked by an interviewer what she most sought in life, hadn't she replied – without hesitation – 'exits'.

This, then, was the kind of ephemera that Millicent fed on. These were her morsels, her tidbits. Yet, meagre as they might appear, they provided her with the running, albeit sporadic, substance of her journal. They were, ultimately, what Millicent 'possessed'. They represented everything about Molly she'd managed to gather, and hold, and shore, in a tight menagerie of images, against the sustained and wordless immensity of her own unfettered adulation.

Early on, Millicent's husband, Sidney (perhaps foreseeing a 'situation' that Millicent already considered foregone, even irreparable), had said, as if in passing, that the whole aura, the whole mystery surrounding Molly – what she cast about her as nonchalantly as a perfume, or dragged behind like some exhausted stole all of it 'would vanish, volatilize, with one single, well-written paragraph'. And that Millicent, better than anyone, could write that paragraph. That even with a single, perfectly observant, penetrating remark, Millicent could clear the air. Could bring Molly out of that vapid mist she seemed to thrive on, and into some kind of perspective. That Millicent could 'shape' Molly: could press, mould her – on language alone – into something palpable, plausible, true.

Then, changing the subject as simply, imperceptibly, as he'd broached it, one might imagine Sidney, now, talking about the day's 'takes' at the Studio, or the problems of 'fabricating palms' for an upcoming extravaganza. Or closer, more immediate, one might picture him tending to his wife in any number of small, solicitous ways. Hadn't he said – and repeatedly – that he was happiest in moments like that: mixing her some tall, tropical concoction, or massaging the long, slender tendons – the 'pampered wings' – of Millicent's shoulders.

'*One single, well-written paragraph*', Millicent repeated, entered into her journal on almost certainly that very same day. *'As if'*, she went on, *'there were words for that rush, that flutter, that immensity. As if one could verbalize on light itself, could twist it into so many sharp, incisive syllables.'*

Then, probably in a quick, impetuous scribble, and in a paragraph of its own (as brief, punctual, as a cloudburst), she'd added: *'Reduce her to a phrase? If only I could.'*

This, then, is Millicent's story: what Millicent wrote about Molly in 1939, and kept – covetously – in the tall, black, box-calf journal. The journal, however, went on to lead a curious and somewhat autonomous existence of its own. A number of years later, in 1959, acting on some still obscure motive, Millicent decided to publish its entire contents in a very private, very limited edition. She must have quite deliberately chosen to print twenty-five copies, that being the minimum number necessary for securing a copyright. As a title, Millicent had the initials 'M.L.' printed on both the title-page and – foil-stamped – on the binding's blue spine. The book itself, hand-set in Bembo and run off on thick Fabriano stock, was printed by a small vanity press on the outskirts of Santa Barbara. On the same day as its publication (the same day, that is, the commissioned work was delivered and, upon delivery, paid for in cash), two of the twenty-five copies, along with the necessary applications, were duly shipped, registered mail, to the Library of Congress. Then, slightly over a month later, and on the very morning Millicent received, in return, her Certificate of Copyright, she invited her private secretary, a Miss N.T., into her living room. There, with the secretary serving as witness, she proceeded to burn – in an open fireplace – not only the original hand-written pages of her journal, but all except one of the twenty-three printed copies still in her possession. Nothing was said, not a word. And no reason was given. No reason needed to be given. Miss N.T.'s function, clearly enough, was exclusively ocular.

Remained, then, the three copies: one in Millicent's possession and two at the Library of Congress. These – the Library's copies – scarcely a month after having been registered, classified, and ranged on their appropriate shelf, as might be expected – predicted, even – vanished. No one would doubt, today, that this wasn't Millicent's doing, that one of the Studio's innumerable agents hadn't simply 'lifted' the two slender volumes and hand-delivered them, a day later and on the opposite coast, to their author. Nor would anyone doubt that the two copies, in the witnessing presence of Miss N.T., didn't suffer the same obliterating fate as their predecessors. A few curls of smoke, catching in a Santa Ana, and the copies were gone, absolved in the dry, ambulant, late-summer light.

Remained, now, the last and unique copy, the copy-elect, the one for which all others had been deliberately sacrificed. This was the one, clearly, that mattered, the copy patently intended (and still legally protected) for the sake of a single, exclusively privileged reader. Because Millicent, it seemed, was putting 'her affairs in order', preparing her estate (from her

own considerable holdings down to her least scarf and platinum stickpin) against what could still be called 'all eventuality'. A cancer, diagnosed half a year earlier, had begun spreading its pale, pestilent fire – a bit quicker with each week – throughout her lower intestines, and Millicent was labouring, but without desperation, to stay on the far side of that particular interval which, with each day, could only diminish, contract. Few, aside from those treating her, knew of her condition, and Sidney, whom she'd been separated from for a number of years now, had no idea whatsoever. One can only imagine him, in such circumstances, rushing to his wife, whatever differences they may have had. He, however, wasn't informed. Millicent preferred managing things in a kind of refined silence of her own. She went about her affairs each day with a cool, unruffled dispatch, clearing, clarifying, eliminating and, most especially, designating. For when she died in the summer of 1960, alone and in a large apartment facing the sea, nothing whatsoever remained in her name except for the contents of a flat safe-deposit box in a large, downtown Los Angeles bank.

A month after her death, in the presence of her attorneys, the bank seals were broken, and the box opened. The box contained, aside from a bit of jewellery and a copy of her will, a quite sizeable fortune in government and municipal certificates (assets, for the most part, she'd brought to her marriage so many years earlier), and, of course, the single remaining copy, bound in flamboyant sapphire, of her journal, *M.L.*

The entire estate (the journal, thus, included) was left in the trusteeship of Millicent's Los Angeles lawyers for the sole benefit of her own rightful heir: a certain Luis deSaumerez. His address, as indicated in the will ('care of General Delivery, Main Post Office, Tallahassee, Florida'), did little to dispel the suspicions that immediately gathered – like so many shadows – about the quick, piston-like sibilations of the beneficiary's name. No one, in fact, had ever heard of Luis deSaumerez, and those closest to Millicent were the first to express a kind of suspended incredulity. Then, too, there were those quick to interpret, to offer their own gratuitous assumptions. Gossip, for at least several months, was – as they say – 'rampant'. Most of the stories, naturally enough, suggested some kind of erotic liaison, a 'late flowering' in Millicent's life, even though everything inherent in her character – a certain puritanical rigour, and a marked penchant for solitude – indicated otherwise. Much of the gossip, certainly, was fuelled by the name alone, by everything 'Luis deSaumerez' suggested of crescent moons and maracas, of glass dance floors and gardenias floating on the

placid surface of finger-bowls. The rumours, by extension, grew more and more explicit. Every kind of 'arrangement' was evoked, as were so many nights and so many long, torrid weekends at 'such and such places' along the coast, and all in exchange for a slender envelope or a dangling pair of mint, glistening car-keys.

The rumours, though, as rumours will, began to subside, dissipate, after a certain number of months, victims themselves, perhaps, of their own fabrications. Other rumours – in a second wave of whispers, muted attributions – considerably more intricate, complex, and certainly more plausible, replaced them. But, being less sensational, they foundered, in turn, all the quicker. They seemed to dissolve, *ipso facto*, into the very air in which, a few weeks earlier, they'd been so eagerly – even triumphantly – released.

Finally, with time, nothing outwardly remained of the whole episode except for a few, loose, still floating threads: the remnants, no doubt, of a once rabid mystification. Quietly, though, and infallibly, Millicent's trust fund continued to function. On the fifth day of each month, month after month, year after year, a cheque (an elongated jade rectangle with three of its four edges as finely serrated as a minute, high-frequency oscillation) was sent to whatever General Delivery address Luis deSaumerez had last happened to indicate. The addresses, it would seem, kept changing. From Tallahassee (after four years) to Panama City (for three); then, just as slowly, across Mississippi, Louisiana, Texas and the Southwest, deSaumerez – it would appear – was locked into a slow, relentless odyssey westward. Then, too, not only did his own addresses keep changing, and continuously, but early on, in 1964, that of the lawyers did, as well. Millicent's law firm, after so many years of respected, respectable practice, closed and passed on its entire clientele to a new, heterogeneous organization which, almost immediately, acquired a somewhat ruthless reputation for its immensely subtle – and immensely successful – deformation of basic statute.

None of this, however, kept the cheques (the monthly 'distributions') from coming, month after month; nor, year after year, Luis deSaumerez (presumably with the one copy of Millicent's journal somewhere among his trundled belongings) from his slow, tellurian migration, westward.

I should add, at this point, that almost all the foregoing material has been drawn from the archives of the Studio where Sidney (Millicent's husband) was once an associate producer. The archives, sometimes referred to as 'the bone heap', not only contain the entire history of fifty years of Studio production, but anything touching upon those who – even vaguely, inadvertently – contributed to that production. Nothing, it's said, ever escapes 'the bone heap', not even the slightest shred of seemingly inconsequential material. So that, along with all the documents one might readily expect (all the treatments and proposals, all the scripts in various states of completion, revision, or utter abandonment, all the 'glossies' and inventories and heated, hour-by-hour, inter-office memos), along with all of this comes an entire world, an underworld, a cryptic substratum composed of pure minutiae. Here, nothing's too small. Here, having passed down a narrow staircase and through a long, neon-lit corridor, its white file-boxes crammed, ceiling to floor, with tightly packed bundles of blue, twice-folded legal briefs, with contracts both broken and fulfilled, with the now scarcely invaded oblivion in which sleep the tides and disclaimers upon which the entire power of the Studio once rested, one comes at last to the ledgers, the account books of unit managers, the cancelled cheques and stubs and balance sheets. One comes, that is, to the tiniest units of trivia, to 'the bone heap's' finest grindings. Here, meticulously recorded, are the day-to-day dolings, the tight trickles of cash, the scrupulously overseen, twice-audited outlays that might be measured (but elsewhere) against the Studio's fabulous, fabulously growing annual receipts.

Here, in fact, resides everything one might possibly need to reconstitute – even a half-century later – the daily lives of particular actors or actresses, both in their professional activities and – by an astute reading of their files, marked 'strictly confidential' – then- personal lives, as well. One simply needed to receive permission, a 'visitor's pass'. Once within (or, more exactly, once under, for one didn't enter the archives: one delved, one plummeted), it wasn't so much an act of scholarship that was called for, as that, precisely, of an exhumation.

It was here, naturally enough, that I'd first come with my small, budding collection of memorabilia. I was, as they say, 'specialising', collecting everything I could on the life and work of that very actress who was still, so many years after her death, referred to at the archives as 'Miss Lamanna'. This, in itself, was a significant tribute, a title of sorts, what collectors would call an 'evidence'. I'd telephoned the archives (it

was some time last September) and requested an appointment. After several secretarial 'screenings', I was connected with the Curator, the Dis, the Pluto of those regions, a certain Mr Jasper May. His tone, over the telephone, was tart, condescending, predicator.

'I only authenticate at lunchtime,' he snapped, 'and even then only by rendezvous. Shall we say twelve-fifteen, Wednesday? You're perfectly prompt, I assume?' His question, clearly enough, was rhetorical: it called for no answer.

'Furthermore,' he went on in a steady, imperturbable staccato, 'I should forewarn you, I don't deal in artefacts. I don't speculate. I don't appraise, either, do you understand? I certify. I say "yes" or "no" as to the authenticity of the article in question. The article, of course, must have originated here, in our Studio. It makes no sense, I mean, presenting me with "doodads" from Columbia, or Universal, or wherever else. We only authenticate what's ours.' As he spoke, his words evoked images of those errant dignitaries, papal delegates, charged with the verification of holy relics, moving from crypt to crypt, chapel to oratory, across the entire surface of the evangelized world. Weren't they (and long before Hollywood, before California, before America itself) invested with the selfsame power to identify, authenticate, to tag or untag, as the case may be, a particular splinter, or thread, or the black knuckle of an alleged saint, the bone itself as if floating in the windows of a gold reliquary's high, hammered shafts?

The analogies, of course, were many, and not altogether fortuitous. Wasn't the rush of present-day collectors for anything belonging to, or reflecting, or touching upon the radiance of their elected and – almost inevitably – extinguished 'stars' only the modern vulgate for those earlier, holier acquisitions? Those cups? Those severed skulls? Those femurs slick as water and gone – with age – a lacquered, nicotine yellow? Wasn't the modern rose, plucked out of black satin, or – quivering with light – the 'mystic metal' of some aluminium button (the unwelded scrap of a wrecked racing car), weren't these our cherished counterparts? Our contemporary equivalents? Weren't they exactly what we'd chosen, driven as we are by some vestigial impulse to produce – and relentlessly – more vestige? To make, out of so much cast-off matter, so many derelict accessories, the very tokens of a late – and fading – mystery?

Jasper May's knowledge, or should I say 'memory', was encyclopedic. His mind seemed to move like an uninterrupted tape, a living inventory in which every treasure in his custody was meticulously noted. His

somewhat supercilious manner gave way – and quickly enough – the very moment he recognized me as a genuine votary, an adept of those exact same chimeras – with their vaporous blacks, silvers and myriad greys – as he himself. His hands moved rapidly as he spoke. They'd dart, exultant, to an affirmation, swoon to a doubt, collapse in perplexity. His bow-tie, with its four floppy petals, rose and fell, mimicking his every gesture like a tiny, cajoling dwarf. I watched him now as he made his way through the small pile of 'glossies' I'd brought, all allegedly of the ambivalent 'Miss Lamanna'. Most of them showed her in all her heavy-haired splendour at various nightspots, or 'taking the pose' at a seaside pier, or decked out in flying togs, scarf blowing from the open cockpit of a floatplane. Slipping one picture under another, smooth as playing cards, his hands moving almost as fast, now, as his glance, Jasper May could vouch, finally, for the authenticity of – perhaps – only one of them. And even that one was subject to doubt.

'Pure Hollywood,' he sighed, and with him the florid dwarf at his collar, the facetious midget, as if contracted, deflated. 'You see,' he continued, 'the instant a star emerges in these parts, you get its duplicate, its double, its dark echo. You might call it a kind of counter-star,' and with this his arm stretched sideways into nothing, really, but its own fluorescent shadow. I caught the quick, pinched glitter of a cuff-link.

'Exactly like the universe, don't you see,' he continued, 'with its negative spaces and all that. A replica, but in darkness. In utter obscurity.

'Well, within a month of the time Miss Lamanna had signed her first, twelve-month contract with the Studio, *she* appeared. Her "other". Or should I say: she materialized, conjured up out of heaven knows where. Central Casting, perhaps. Or, more likely, out of some beauty salon ("parlour", she'd call it) in Spokane or Duluth. Or even likelier yet, some backwater luncheonette with a backwater news-stand just big enough to handle a magazine like *Photoplay*. And there, just then, in the September 1938 issue, I believe, she'd discover a large, glamorous spread – photos, interview and all – of that very person who'd become, maybe that very instant, the model, the prototype for her every borrowed gesture, the mannequin for her own, floating, indeterminate identity.

'Granted, there were certain basic similarities. Vivien Voigt, for that was her name, had the same facial proportions: that perfect, perfectly raised oval with its high forehead, its brows like the spread wings of a long, languorous "Y" or a Greek "upsilon" that joined invisibly over the nose, then traced a fine line downwards into an exquisite pair of scarcely

flaring nostrils. What a face, or, should I say: what faces. And yes, the eyes, if not the exact expression: the eyes, themselves, grey, immensely grey, and tapering either side to two, slightly pendant, slightly dolorous points. In that, one must admit, both these ladies were nearly identical.

‘But look, look closer.’ And here, Jasper May leaned over one of the photographs and, with a lead pencil, pointed to Vivien Voigt’s cheeks, first one, then the other. The picture, catching the reflection of an overhanging lamp, flashed – for an instant – like tin. ‘Look carefully,’ he said, and pointed to a tiny dimple, a minuscule crease, half-buried in each of those lustrous cheeks. It would be a first distinguishing feature, a subtle mark that would forever differentiate Vivien Voigt from Molly Lamanna, no matter what efforts the former might resort to. ‘And here, over here, as well.’ The tip of Jasper May’s pencil moved smoothly over the grey, opalescent landscape of the photograph to reach Vivien Voigt’s chin. Here, he pointed to a slight cleft, a nearly indiscernible ‘fault’ in the lay of her features. This tiny, ineffaceable sign, this, as well, would separate the two women; would preserve, with a few scarcely discernible traits, their separate, physical identities.

There remained, however, an even more obscure and certainly more intriguing point of differentiation. Jasper May, clearly enough, was saving it for last. For high on Vivien Voigt’s right cheek floated – like a mysterious punctuation – an exquisitely situated birthmark, a dark, irradant star. ‘Here,’ explained the omniscient Jasper May, ‘here, the young lady made a serious, very serious, mistake. She’d had the birthmark burnt in artificially, exactly the same size and in the same place as that in the *Photoplay* pictures of Miss Lamanna. How could she have known that those particular photographs by Sam Haskill were taken (and this was one of Sam Haskill’s professional secrets) in a floor-to-ceiling mirror? That Haskill often posed his female figures gazing into the eyes of the most absorbing, transcendent of subjects: that of themselves? How *could* she know? How could she possibly have been aware of this when she had that tiny nevus burnt into her all-too-ambitious flesh? That she was copying an inverted image? A kind of white negative? That her star had just been branded, but on the wrong side?’

‘But Molly – Miss Lamanna – what was *her* attitude?’ I asked, irritated by my own intrusion, by the necessity to intrude. ‘How did she take to the arrival of that mock double, that sham twin, coming as you put it – out of some backwater, and landing in the midst of all this glitter?’

‘Oh, she loved it,’ Jasper May exuded, letting the slick photographs fan across the glass surface of his table, then leaning back into the lavender recesses of his armchair. ‘First of all, she must have felt terrifically flattered having a “stand-in” already, an “understudy”, and she scarcely more than a starlet herself. Can you imagine it, at age twenty-four, twenty-five? Having a salaried look-alike? And she certainly loved (as much as she loved anything, that is) appearing in public with Vivien Voigt, going to parties together, or the beach; loved being puzzled over, being the subject – or is it the object – of a reversible identity.’

‘She, who had so very little use for herself, who remembered, or cared to remember, so little, must have taken an intense pleasure letting someone else be Molly Lamanna, even for the length of a quickly forgotten reception, or soiree. She seemed, in fact, to derive as much pleasure getting “lost” in the anonymity of her understudy as the understudy did in being “found”, “recognized”, and “invested” with all the notoriety of the true icon herself.’

‘So, she cultivated Vivien Voigt. Or, to be more accurate, she let herself be cultivated, exploited, deliberately used by that all-too-eager predator. She let her wear her clothes, and whatever jewellery she possessed, gave her the keys to her car, her apartment, whatever Vivien Voigt desired. Let her become, in fact, a kind of life-size projection. A *Doppelgänger* in the flesh. I’m quite certain she would have let Vivien Voigt drink the full length of her reflection off a wardrobe mirror, if she could have. Would have let her drain her identity, entire. And that,’ Jasper May remarked, ‘is exactly the charm and interest of these photographs,’ as he picked up several of the ‘eight-tens’ I’d collected, a victim myself – half a century later – of that ‘reversible identity’, of Molly Lamanna’s casually organized masquerades. For Molly wasn’t to be ‘collected’ altogether that easily. Even at this distance, at this late date, she still perplexed, troubled, laid a kind of labyrinth in the way of anyone who’d approach her, who’d attempt to touch her existence, or the rumours that constituted – for the most part – that existence. Of anyone, that is, who got ‘too close’.

‘There are articles and interviews, of course, and passages from quite a number of biographies.’ And here, Jasper May proved to be immeasurably generous with his knowledge, his recorder-like memory, his punctilious hold over the archival ‘bone heap’. ‘But,’ he went on, ‘she entirely escapes us, and quite unlike anybody else. She escapes us not so much from what she *didn’t* leave (in the way of memories, memoirs, all the so-called surviving evidence), as from what she *did*. All that mask, those

mock appearances and feigned realities, all that deliberate, deliberately trumped-up fiction that – under the least scrutiny – simply dissolves. Clearly, she used whatever disguises, whatever ruses were available to preserve her own privacy. But even more, and more meaningfully, Miss Lamanna employed every conceivable subterfuge, I'm convinced, for the sake of making her escape – her own meticulously prepared flight, outward – all the more effective. She took the very best of herself with her, and left – left what? Luminous peelings. An exquisite shell.

'Still, still,' he continued, 'we haven't abandoned all hope. We never do, really. For eventually every bit of evidence comes our way. All the dark, jealously guarded secrets of our most glittering figures, all, all of it, I can assure you, ends up in our files; comes to a close, eventually, in these carefully ventilated catacombs. Even,' he went on, 'that somewhat mythical journal of Millicent Rappaport's. What Mrs Rappaport wrote about Miss Lamanna so many years back and that no one, yet, has seen, aside perhaps from her invisible heir. Everyone, however, speaks of that journal as such a treasure, a goldmine of information, an ultimate source book on the period in general, and on Miss Lamanna in particular. It will wend its way (everything does) into these cellars, these humidified crypts,' Jasper May promised. 'Of that, I'm perfectly certain.'

And so, for the very first time, I heard of Millicent's journal, of its existence, of the book that would be the source and pretext for this present work, its very innards. But that afternoon, the mere mention of the journal struck me (if it struck at all) as some entirely minor reference to some utterly obscure memorabilia. I wasn't in the least intrigued. That day, in fact, I was entirely preoccupied with Jasper May's authentications. I'd brought along with me, aside from the photographs, a few penny postcards, signed 'Molly Lamanna' (all of which Mr May deemed, without hesitation, counterfeit); a raspberry red necktie she was reputed to have worn in her second film, *A Glance Away* (which the Curator regarded as more than dubious); and finally a medium-size, heart-shaped mirror that had also appeared in that very same film. In one of its few memorable moments, Molly is seen as if swimming into the mirror, her face and hair filling the hand-carved heart in what could only be called, in itself, a 'cameo appearance'. This piece, at least, Jasper May esteemed 'undoubtedly genuine'. It had been expressly ordered by the Studio in January 1939. A local silversmith (his invoice and all the related correspondence were duly consulted) had carved, out of a silver plaque, the dark hollow of a heart. He'd then inserted, just under this

hollow, in a pair of carefully prepared furrows, the thin sheet of a mirror, of a shimmering, heart-shaped reflection. This, this 'artefact', received the Studio's 'tags' with Jasper May's signature – his blessings – neatly affixed.

In leaving, I was given a quick glance at the newly installed wardrobe collection. Again, it was the good work of the Curator himself: his suggestions, his designs, his execution. None of the Studio's historic costumes remained now on clothes-hangers. The whole collection had been laid flat in specially conceived drawers, long as coffins and narrow as attache cases. The drawers rolled open with the pale roar of exhausted thunder; rolled closed with a sharp, irrecusable click.

Here, I was given a very rapid peek at one of Molly Lamanna's evening dresses, a 'costume gown' designed for her third film by Travis Banton. Fully beaded, it must have clung, once, as tight as fish scales, and slithered – in a languorous half-twist – from a shirred knot on Molly's left shoulder to her very toes. I imagined, at her toes, a pinched pair of emerald pumps. I imagined, too, the rasp – the dense, metallic rustle – the entire gown must have made as she moved. The costume itself, Jasper May pointed out, had suffered 'all the indignities of time'. Hanging as it had for so many years – decades, even – on a clothes-hanger, some of the weighty beads, with their knitted fixings, had shredded free from their thin chiffon base. I asked myself, though, whether this gradual degradation wasn't in fact another one of Molly Lamanna's many posthumous devices, one of a variety of means she might have employed for effacing her traces, eradicating every sign of her passage, leaving us – as she had – with so dramatically little.

Before I left, I ran the palm of my hand over that shimmering mass, catching, as I did, the thin clicking of its glass cylinders. Limply, the beads rolled over, like so many stranded seashells, caught now in an intertidal wash, and subject to the whim of the curious, or simply that of the happenstantial.