

eusapia

sketch for a hypothetical story.

introduction

the name eusapia, which mixes together the greek and the latin (the adverbial prefix eu- in greek stands for “well, proper, good”, while sapio in latin means “to be wise, to know”) is borrowed from italo calvino’s novel, “the invisible cities”. etymologically eusapia is “the wise one,” the one that can discern properly. in calvino’s book marco polo, a guest at the court of the kublai khan, strings together a narration of his travels through a constellation of imaginary cities, each bearing the enigmatic name of a woman. specifically, eusapia is a city mentioned by the explorer as part of a thematic group titled “cities and the dead”.

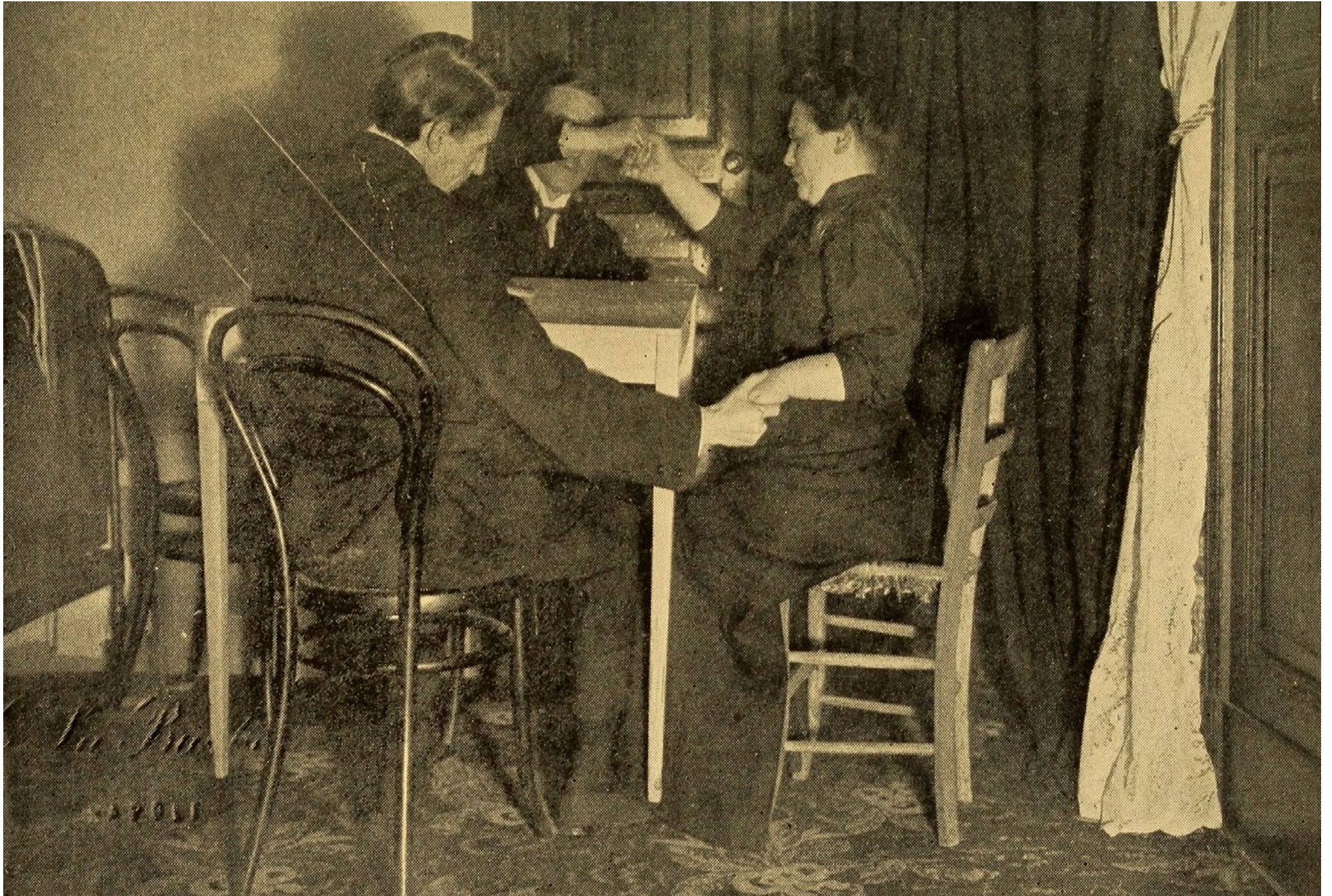
marco polo describes eusapia as the city where the living built a parallel underground town for their dead, which is remarkably similar to their own. after a while the dead start developing their own customs, which are in turn copied by the living, so that in the end nobody could distinguish anymore between the two cities. thus ironically eusapia, the city of discernment, is the one where nobody can tell the dead and the living apart.

it is more than probable that calvino found inspiration for his city’s name in eusapia palladino, a renown italian medium active between the end of the xix century and the beginning of the xx. at a time where irrationalism was rampant, thanks to her suggestive live performances palladino had captivated a loyal following from all over europe, and counted among her admirers personalities of the day as the criminologist cesare lombroso and the writer arthur conan doyle.

this premise relates to a previous strand of work of my own that never fully came into being. in 2016 i did some extensive visual survey on the structural and social similarities between the cemetery and its urban surroundings. by researching on location, i wanted to examine how customs are carried across the two spaces, so distant and yet so alike. after months of surveying the cemeteries of the city of lisbon, where i was living at the time, i decided to abandon the project, as i had become unable to keep a proper distance from my material and therefore to use it both in a fictional and in a documentary format. had i, too, become unable to tell the difference between one city and the other?

years later, some of the ideas collected at the time carried over to this newer project, as did my fascination for the provincial urban space and combinatory storytelling techniques, with the latter being also a fundamental aspect of calvino’s own work.

i’m not sure yet where i can and want to carry this work, and how far i can go with it within my limitations, but my intention is, to an extent, to study a medium i already know about in a manner that is not yet familiar to me, to bring my frame of reference into the process, and see what i can achieve through it.



— eusapia palladino during one of her table levitation demonstrations.

background notes

my mother always retells one incident that took place when i was around five years old. one night our family went out of the house directed to my grandmother's place. we were completely broke, to the point there was nothing left at home to eat and no money to buy any food until my father's next pay day. my parents, who were not living lavishly by any means, always seemed to have poor money administration skills, and my father's modest office job was certainly not sufficient for affording such a lack of discernment in financial matters. even for them however this was quite an extraordinary situation. it's not without qualms, and likely with rather heavy hearts too, that my parents decided to go out that night in the hope my paternal grandmother would lend her helping hand in such a predicament. at the very least they hoped she would give a little child (me) something to eat for that day. but she refused, and instead we were turned away rather unceremoniously. meanwhile, in grandmother's dining room my younger cousin was making a great show of enjoying his soup, which he was slurping noisily in front of the tv. the event had such a strong impact on my mother's imagination that to this day she is still recalling it as a sort of legendary, larger-than-life event.

another incident took place many years later in the same city. someone close to me went back to our hometown for the funeral of a close relative. he got slightly sick during the journey, so one night, while his family was in the mourning, he went out of the house in search of aspirin. he found only one open pharmacy, which used to be a small shop but had been remodeled as a mammoth establishment with a

curiously labyrinthine and counter-intuitive—for its use, that is—interior. instead of selling my friend the simple medication he requested and letting him go, the pharmacist, perhaps bored and with the perspective of a long and solitary night ahead of him, kept him there for a while to lament about the state of things in the city and how desperate the situation was for those who had not been lucky enough to get away.

these two episodes, distant in time and characters and yet somehow closely interconnected in spirit, partly informed the story and setting of this (hypothetical) short piece.

both events feel close to me, even though thinking about it i have no real connection with either. in one case i can remember only vaguely what happened, and i suspect that what i remember is for the greatest part influenced by my mother's way of retelling it; in the other occasion i was not present at all, and i only heard someone's account of the facts. this ambivalent feeling of superimposed connection and disconnection is perhaps the foremost reason i believe the only way i can and wish to envision a visual narrative based on these stories is in the form of a crossover between videogame and animated short.



— the remodeled asm 2, rieti, july 2016.

themes

when i was a little kid, no respectable woman would have gone out on her own after dark, at least not in the place where i come from. provincial life was fierce and there were all sorts of perils out there, and being robbed of one's reputation was one of the most terrifying. in the average family, it was the father who would risk his life and go out at night, to buy sodium and potassium citrate against pernicious nocturnal vomit attacks or to walk the dog for instance, and the mother would do the same only in case of emergency—even though i don't recall witnessing such a thing all that often.

up to a point i grew up thinking women couldn't do many things and assumed that even if adulthood meant increased freedom—you could drink ice water at will and wear pajamas outdoors if you liked—for some mysterious reason women had it much worse than everybody else. mothers were a special kind of woman in that it seemed they had graver responsibilities and more limitations than the rest of humankind and were overall barely more independent than us kids. the only advantages they seemed to have over other adults were that they got to choose everybody's meals at home and were allowed to be perpetually grumpy.

the media have not been against preserving a certain image of the mother, and by extension of her dramaturgic place and possibilities. the same cannot be said of her male counterpart, which usually enjoys a greater flexibility of circumstances. for instance, there is a number of dull and hesitant fathers and husbands doing all sorts of things in survival horror games.

the story i propose wishes to look at motherhood in some of its less evident and perhaps less manifestly motherly aspects. this comes not from firsthand experience, but from years spent with mothers: my own of course, those of my close and distant acquaintances, and then again those belonging my generation who, out of hopeless optimism or acute despair, decided to dive into motherhood as if into the pits of existence, never to re-emerge from it. the motherhood i'm looking for in the story is the kind of phenomenon that can be observed in the deep provincial setting, with its quirks and sets of unfathomable rules and irrational beliefs. everything in such a setting can become a damning choice, and even the most negligible task comes to encompass life with the power of a self-fulfilling prophecy.

these themes sound grander than they are supposed to, when in fact they should stay small, so that they can communicate with one another behind the scenes in hushed voices. here i am hoping that none of them becomes so conspicuous that it can be identified and isolated from the rest.



synopsis

a woman goes out on a winter night to find medicine for her child who's fallen ill. in her car she wanders for some time across the empty city in search of an open pharmacy. she finally finds one open, but soon discovers the shop doesn't sell what she needs. the pharmacist is an eccentric figure who launches into a confused monologue about the end (of the world? of the city?). he gives a prophecy to the woman to bring home with her, assuring it will help the child. partly reassured, the woman sets off headed home. the end leaves the spectator in doubt about whether the cure was effective and if the prophecy ever became true.

story structure

- i. infinite loop. use of repetition with variations.
- ii. use of random dialogues within a set of choices as in adventure games: it's not possible to know from the start which version of the story one is presented with.
- iii. even with chance dialogue, the storyline never actually changes. the illusion of potentiality acts as surrogate element for player agency and is prophecy-oriented.





characters

woman: lives alone with one child. average body type, a little on the heavy side. she wears a dark coat and has dark hair. quite deadpan; she's irresolute and weak-willed.

car: the humble-looking regent specimen is mercurial and womblike, affecting the woman's interaction with the environment.

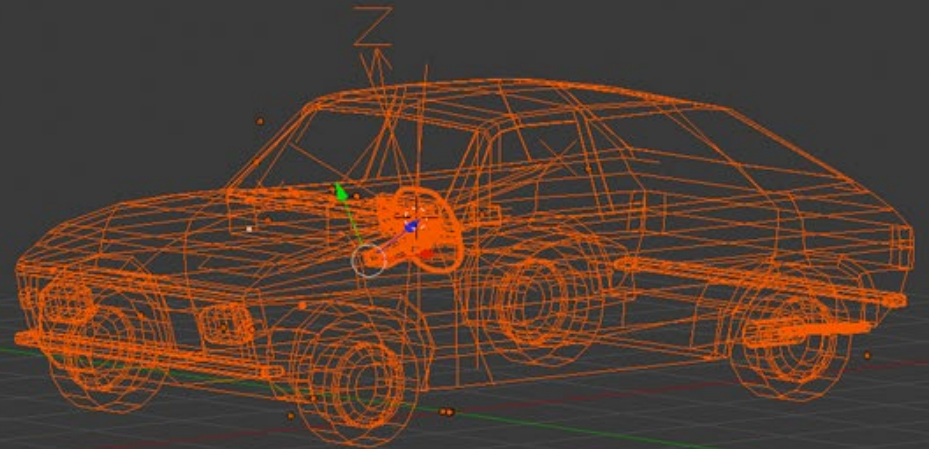
pharmacist: charles laughton's lost twin. nothing is known about him. he is shown as a protean figure.

child: her presence is mostly implied, she's not a real character per se. the dynamics child/medicine works as a kind of macguffin, setting the sparse action in motion, but not really influencing it beyond a superficial level.

setting

exterior: a cheerless nowhere city being swallowed by a nasty shroud of fog. there's no sense of direction to be had in there. perhaps there actually was a charming town under the fog at some point, perhaps not. nobody can say for sure.

interior: the house of the woman, looked at rather briefly, and the pharmacy which she visits at the end of her journey. there may not be fog indoors, but there's no more clarity to be found here.



— building the regent model.

general outline

night time. a woman passes through the glass door of a pharmacy. she enters an anteroom that has nothing striking about it save for its utter emptiness. she opens the next door and finds herself inside a house, which is her own. telephone cables run through the walls, and the following images show the woman's life through bits and pieces of interior details. in one of the rooms a bed is glimpsed at briefly in which a tiny humanoid form is lying.

in the house the woman is in conversation on the phone. she's trying to persuade someone at the other end of the line to let her borrow money which she promises to pay back in a few days time. from bits of conversation it can be supposed that the invisible telephone interlocutor is the woman's mother and that the daughter requires money for medicine for her own child who's fallen ill. as the dialogue goes on, the woman's attempt to borrow the money proves unsuccessful. she gets ready anyway to go out to get the needed medicine.

the staircase of the building. the woman moves across the space enveloped in her dark coat (is she shown here though? perhaps not). as she does so, at times sounds from apartments come to meet her.

in the parking lot of the apartment building the impending night is murky as grey milk. the woman pauses for a while beside her car, keys in hand. her irresolution clashes with the urgency of her task and her stance is unreadable. after a long pause she finally gets in the car. the radio turns on on its own and music starts without apparent reason.

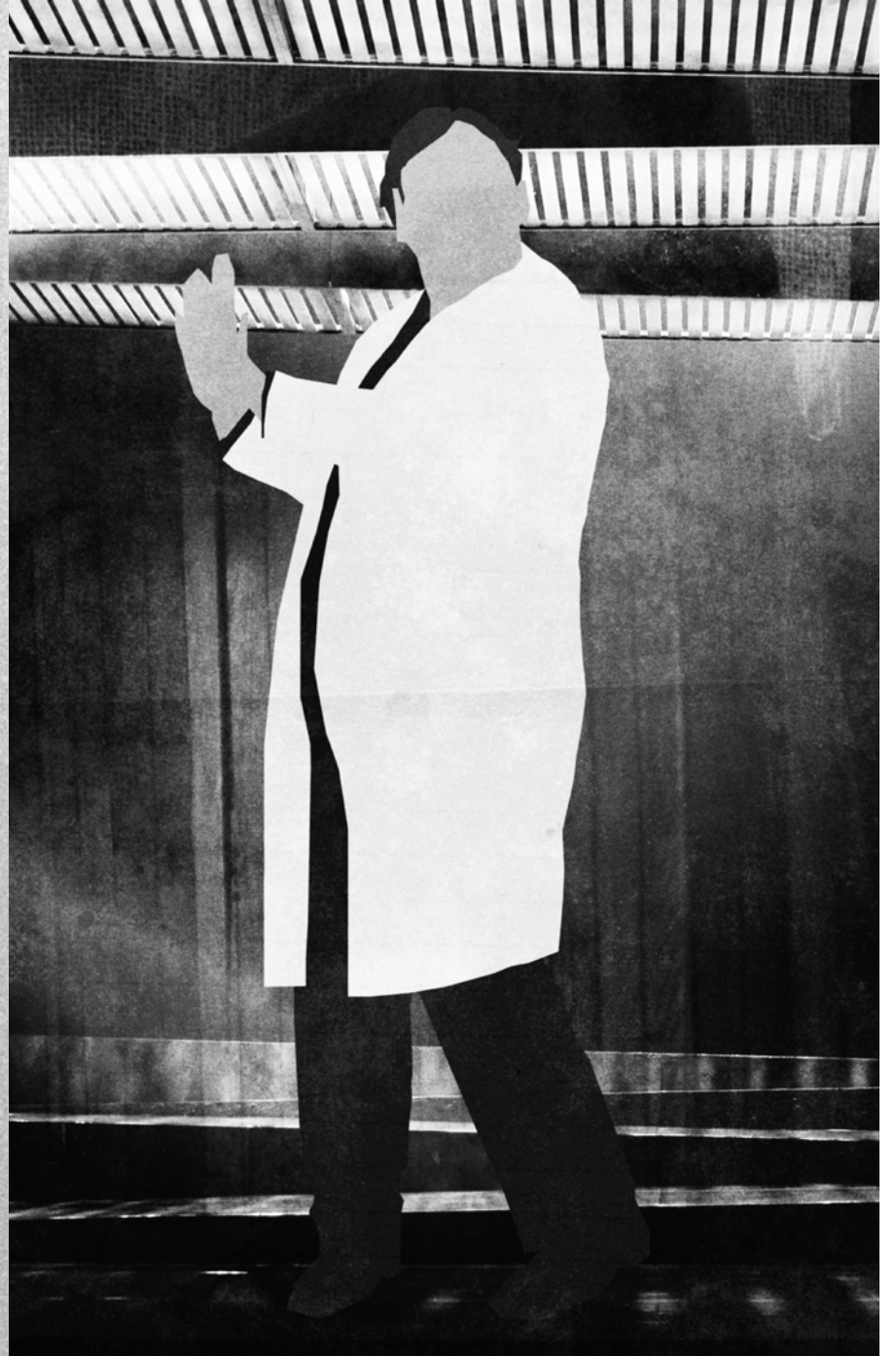
something is clearly off with the sound of the radio, but the woman doesn't seem to notice and gets started on her quest.

the car glides across the cityscape as the inconsistent sound of the radio accompanies the woman's pensive mood.

the local pharmacy. there is light coming from inside, but the door is shut fast. noises can be heard for which it's hard to imagine a clear source. assuming there must be someone in there, the woman tries to call attention to herself. her efforts however prove fruitless and the racket goes on. finally, she puts her hand in a slit in the wall through which meds are supposedly dispensed at night. when she does so, somebody's voice is heard. after which the light goes out and all turns silent. the pharmacy's sign board displays briefly a bunch of puzzling words which may or may not be directions to the next open chemist, going blank soon after.

back in the car the woman wonders about the message on the sign board. what she read seem to her familiar and foreign at the same time. as she tries to connect words with the continuation of her quest, we get farther and farther away and the environment grows increasingly dimmer, until the car is a tiny spot in an expanse of fog. the radio is still on.

the radio's broadcasting drifts in and out of silence as the dull city emerges in bits and pieces from the fog. at times the woman is aware of the sound, but in a clearly inconsequential



— character sketches for the woman and the pharmacist.

general outline (continued)

sort of way; more often however she appears oblivious.

without any notion of where she is and how she got there in the first place, the woman chances upon an open pharmacy. but is it the one she was looking for? she's not sure and it doesn't matter, as by now the fog that has been following her all along has swept away her sense of purpose. in the parking lot she's alone.

the same scene as the opening is repeated where the woman passes the door of the pharmacy and is then confronted with the empty anteroom. after these first doors there's another, and after that a corridor. there are more doors and more passages. the products lined up along the walls in their neat packages are all looking the same, arranged as patterns going on endlessly. the woman feels like walking in a vast desert, across sandy dunes repeating again and again. doubting she's moving forward at all, the woman sits on a chair she finds on her way. when she's settled down the pharmacy counter emerges and a voice rings in the space.

the voice belongs to the pharmacist, a bulky man whose slippery persona is every bit as perplexing as it is contrived. after his welcome and a confused eschatological monologue that seems to go on and on, the pharmacist leaves the woman with a prophetic prediction in a physical form, stating that even though what he's offering is no medicine, it will certainly be of help to the ailing child.

the woman exits the pharmacy through its main door. the parking lot

is the same, and yet it's different. close to her car, in place of one of the street lamps, there is now a tree in full bloom. its whitish flowers glow eerily in the fog like luminescent fish at the bottom of the ocean. as she starts to move closer to the car, for the first time the woman seems taken aback. the image of the tree in the fog is unbearable. midway, the woman turns back to look again at the pharmacy.

the loop starts over.

REFERENCES / SIMILARITIES

A Sorrow Beyond Dreams

A LIFE STORY

Peter Handke

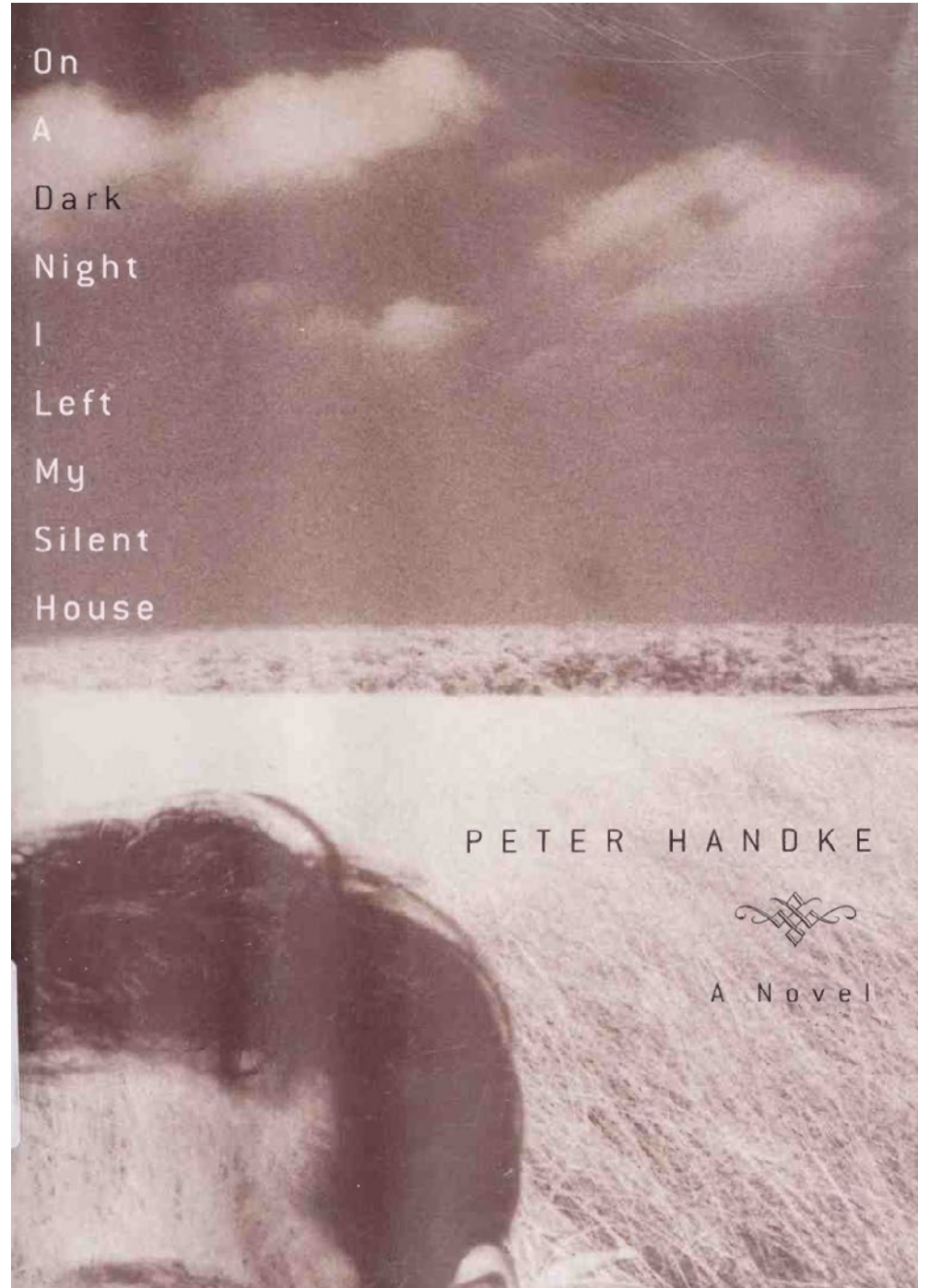


On
A
Dark
Night
I
Left
My
Silent
House

PETER HANDKE



A Novel





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pedro páramo

juan rulfo



EURIPIDES
ALCESTIS
AND OTHER PLAYS

HIPPOLYTUS
IPHIGENIA IN TAURIS
ALCESTIS



A NEW TRANSLATION BY
PHILIP VELLACOTT

THE PENGUIN
CLASSICS



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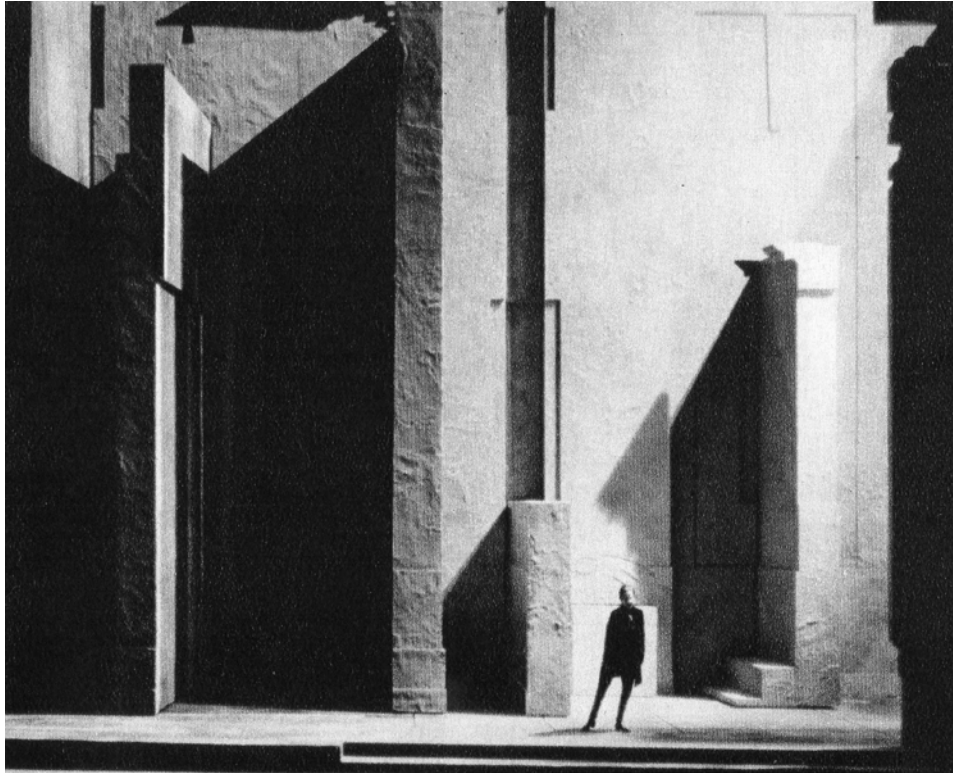
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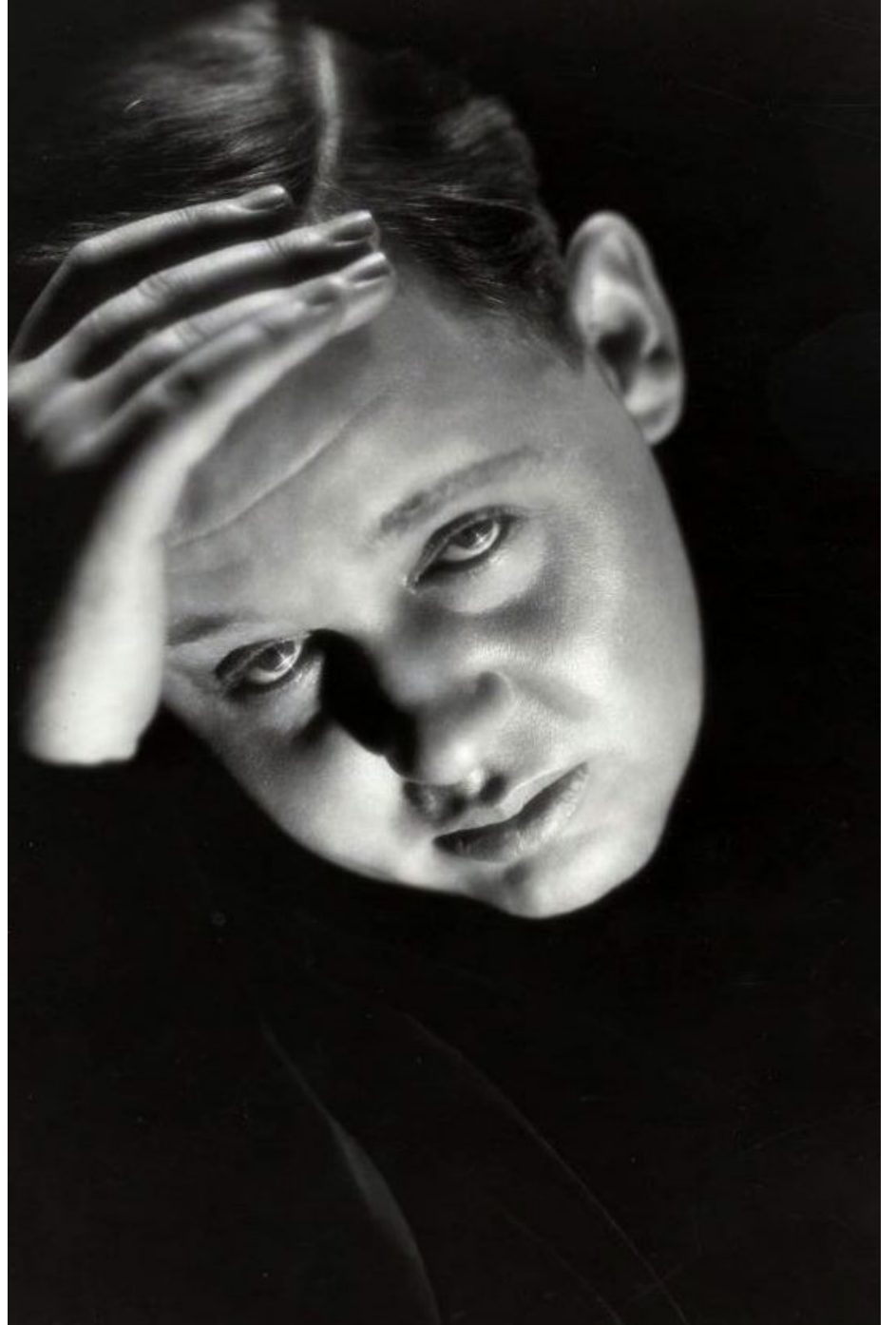
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