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“Emma’s Eyes” (translated from the French, “Les Yeux d’Emma” by Antoine Chalvin, Alfil Editions, 1994. By permission of the author, A. Chalvin. 3,407 words

Emma’s Eyes

Antoine Chalvin

Translated
by
Margot Miller

It was an old hovel built of dried stone, out of place on the moor. It just appeared, without warning, a hundred yards in front of me, still shimmering, like a heat mirage.

It was about two o’clock; I’d been walking since dawn in this desert of gorse and heather, looking for an improbable path. My backpack was getting heavy and I was out of water. This house was providential. I advanced toward the only window of the façade. It looked into what seemed to me to be the main room: a large square room, nearly empty, with nothing but a table and four chair, an iron bed and a china closet. The walls were naked, without any sort of decoration. I noticed only, on the left, propped up on the mantel, a small frame containing the photograph of a woman. A reflection on the glass prevented me from clearly distinguishing her features, but it seemed she was young, and very beautiful.

I knocked on the front door. Three distinct thumps were enough to awaken something inside: I first heard a door opening, then a rather slow gait, which took its time coming toward me. I imagined whoever it was inspecting the room before responding.

When the door finally opened, I had difficulty repressing my surprise: the face of the person who stood in front of me was entirely concealed under a black wool hood. Two holes allowed me to see the dull and expressionless eyes. The worn clothing and the rather stooped figure suggested an old woman. She looked at me without uttering a word, her hand still poised on the doorframe. I was coughing and explaining confusedly that I had gotten lost and I needed water.

She indicated I should sit at the table and, still without speaking, disappeared into the next room. I was alone for a long time in the large space, growing more and more uneasy. Mechanically raising my eyes to the mantel, I saw the photograph was no longer there.

When the old woman at last came back from the kitchen, her face still covered, she carried a place setting and a dish of beans, which she set in front of me saying,

“You will eat. Afterwards, I will show you your room.” Thus, without asking, I was invited to spend the night. This proposition seemed suspicious. I was just about to decline the invitation when I saw through the back window the silhouette of a woman outlined against the clear blue sky. She was walking toward the house. Her dress floated above the heather. The backlighting, the distance, and perhaps the numbing cold that interfered with my vision prevented me from distinguishing more. It was, however, enough to make me decide to wait.

I conscientiously emptied my plate of beans, keeping watch out of the corner of my eye on the approaching silhouette. Then the old woman took me to what was to be my room: a small, bare room with a mirrored armoire and a bed covered in an enormous eiderdown quilt. The bed and the room had been cleaned, as if they were expecting someone. Handing me the key, the old woman said,

“You will always close and lock, turning the key twice.” It was the second time she had spoken to me, and her strange manner of speaking in the future tense already unnerved me. I didn’t know if I should take these sibylline sentences as orders, as advice, or as predictions.

Outside, the other woman must have been nearer now. I walked around the large room trying to catch sight of her, but the window frame was empty. She must have been coming around the house. I sat, facing the doorway. Footsteps approached and a young woman, fairly tall, appeared on the threshold. She wore a white dress, and her face... was dissimulated under a black wool hood.

It was at this precise moment, I believe, that I decided to stay. I have rather a placid and reserved nature. Mysteries, ordinarily, interest me very little, mysterious people even less, and this masked old woman would undoubtedly not have held me long. The young woman, on the other hand, more than intrigued me: there was something there, in the way she stood in the door, tall and straight in her dress shivering in the wind, a kind of vegetal perfection. It was, surely, this fantastic arboreal apparition that made me see something of value in the hood: my curiosity overtook me, and suddenly I wanted to see her face.

Slowly approaching me, she planted in my eyes her incredible green gaze, almost florescent, and extended her hand, soiled with dirt, saying simply in a soft voice,

“Hello.”

I no longer know what I did with this outstretched hand. Kiss or handshake? I believe there was a bit of both in the hesitant meeting of our fingers. I was still fascinated by the two green crystals encrusted in the black wool. When she turned to join the old woman in the kitchen, the room felt somber.

The afternoon passed quickly. I spent a long time engrossed in my maps until nearly evening, without being able to find this farm. The old woman passed virtually all her time in the kitchen, always shifting dishes about. The green eyes, they knitted until evening at the far end of the room. The meal couldn't have been more morose: the old woman brought me a plate of soup and a platter of tomatoes. Then she sat at the far end of the room as well, next to the bed. I ate alone, by the light of the oil lamp, across from the two silent masks.

After downing a large bowl of herb tea, I took leave of the women and retired to my room. I undressed in the darkness and lay down on the eiderdown, not without first closing and locking the door with two turns, following the recommendation of the old woman. A few seconds later, the door of the next room opened, and sounds of flatware clinking could be heard in both the small room and the large one: the women each ate alone, undoubtedly so as not to mutually discover their faces. I began to suspect that these hoods were not meant only to intrigue passing strangers. What they hid had to be pretty bad for these two women—mother and daughter, perhaps—who lived alone on the moor, miles from any place, not to take them off in each other's presence. I imagined their faces disfigured, gouged out, ravaged perhaps by some skin disease. I considered one by one every image in my gallery of horrors, without pulling from memory anything monstrous enough to justify this reciprocal dissimulation. I fell asleep in the middle of my little teratological inventory.

I believe the best way to get to the bottom of mysteries is to not try to penetrate them. They must be allowed to ripen and resolve themselves. Questions serve only to obscure things. It was in this state of mind that I passed the following day. It seemed

quite natural to the two women that I stay on several days. I didn't have to ask. I wanted in particular to discretely observe them. They spoke very little to one another, and to me even less. I learned all the same that the young woman was called Emma and that the old one was indeed her mother, as I had guessed.

The following days were nothing so much as long exercises in immobility. I spent them in the sun, seated on the small stone bench alongside the side of the house. I settled my back against the lukewarm wall and let myself be invaded by the heat, unable to see anything around me, the light being so violent. I thought of nothing. I listened was all, without tiring, to the monotonous sounds that peopled this deserted place: crickets, the old woman's racket in the kitchen, and the light groaning of the front door, when Emma returned at the end of the afternoon with her basket full of wild herbs. At night, I went into the large room where my meal awaited me. I ate without rushing, employing slow gestures, and after drinking my herb tea, I wished the two women seated next to the bed in the half-light a good evening. Only Emma responded to my greeting, by raising her green eyes toward mine for a few seconds of human contact at the close of these insensible days.

Many weeks passed in this way, in the calm and uniformity of ritual. One morning however, I got up earlier than usual, well before dawn. In the dining room deep in shadow, the old woman was still sleeping on her iron bed. I went back into my room and slipped out noiselessly through the window. The moor was gray and silent. It was chilly. A light fog still obscured the horizon, but the day promised to be fine, as warm and clear as the preceding ones. I lay down on the ground and let my mind wander. A vague feeling, which had bothered me for a few days without my being able to define it exactly,

suddenly took form before me, and I realized with horror that I no longer knew who I was. I tried unsuccessfully to call up my friends, my occupation, my home... Nothing came but anonymous images, gleaned along the path of my hike on the moor: countryside, sky, leaves of heather... This monotonous desert had invaded my whole memory.

Panicked, I opened my wallet, where I found an identity card with my photograph. The name I just managed to read meant nothing. I re-read it, over and over; I had the impression it was never the same. I also found a photograph of a woman. I looked at it a long time without recognition, until it began to disappear: Soon, all I saw on the photo was a head hooded in black, which resembled Emma.

I went madly through my pockets looking for other clues, and pulled out the key to my room. Suddenly, I remembered that I had not relocked the door. It seemed very serious, although I couldn't say why. I got up precipitously and ran to the house. I approached the window of my room. Inside, like a giant white halo in the half-light, I saw Emma—naked. She was contemplating her body in the mirror of the armoire, the only one in the house. She wore only her hood and looked like a decapitated marble statue. She seemed far away, much farther than this room where I looked upon her. She disappeared. Only her reflection in the mirror remained, the only sensate witness to her presence in this instant and in this place. It occurred to me suddenly that she didn't belong to any place or to any moment in particular, but she was of all eternity and only sometimes, in some places, allowed herself to be seen, here or there. I understood that her eyes were time passing and that her faceless body was confused with the world. I understood, or thought I understood, many other things as well, as I watched the image of

her body imprinted on the dark veil of the mirror. It wasn't until the old woman in her kitchen doubled her usual racket that I came back to my senses. Emma had not seen me. She was still glued to the mirror, as if she too was fascinated by what she saw there and what she understood.

I entered the dining room noiselessly and approached my room on tiptoe. After hesitating a moment, I opened the door abruptly. Emma did not jump. She turned slowly toward me and looked at me without speaking. I spoke her name in an uncertain voice. She did not respond. She turned away and got dressed in silence; then she went out of my room whispering as she passed me:

“My name is Emmanuelle.”

The rest of the day was as usual right through to the evening meal. No one made the slightest allusion to what had happened. But when I said good night to the two women, Emma, unlike before, did not raise her eyes to mine.

Nothing was the same. All it had taken was awakening a little earlier than usual, taking an unfortunate walk on the moor, an insignificant carelessness... In a single day everything was lost; in a slip between the cup and the lip, the lovely ritual of gestures that ended each evening in a few seconds when the marvelous green-eyed gaze turned toward me was broken.

I went to bed a little uneasy, naïvely hoping that the night might wash away my sins and that the following day would put things right. But I abandoned all hope when, already in bed, I noticed I had forgotten to close the shutters. The light of the moon bathed the room in a changing and unreal light that seemed to give life to the large, sculpted armoire. The mirror undulated like a white sheet and I thought I could still make

out the filigreed imprint of Emma's body. I imagined that she was dead and that she inhabited the armoire, with the mirror as her shroud... I was recalled from my reverie by a light noise against the door: an imperceptible scratching, as if a tiny animal were trying to get into the room. I was about to open the door, but before I could, Emma put her arms around my neck and pushed her body against mine. I remember closing the door and tripping toward the bed. Then there was a huge void. I don't think I lost consciousness. I suppose, however, that I closed my eyes because I remember the instant I opened them: Emma was sleeping next to me, naked, but she still wore the hood over her head. It was now or never! I reached slowly toward her inseparable wool mask... I hesitated a moment... and my hand trembled. I didn't rally want to see her face any more. I think it frightened me.

I lay still for a long moment, eyes open, looking at the moon games and the clouds framed by the windowpanes. Unexpected gloom left blue shadows on the objects, slowly darkened the room, and seemed to contract around these last bits of solidity: the mirror in the armoire—where a bright reflection seemed to keep watch permanently—and the luminous body of Emmanuelle which floated on the eiderdown, her arms crossed next to mine... Then the shadowy folds lifted. Everything seemed to get its breath before our bodies dissolved in the light and the room became infinite. And then another line of clouds started another reduction of time and space. The room, subject to the whim of the wind, existed entirely in this long irregular heartbeat, by the grace of shadow and the light of the moon.

I fell asleep against my will. In the morning, when I awoke, Emma was gone. The door was locked from the inside. The window was closed. I thought I had dreamed, and

would undoubtedly have convinced myself if it hadn't been for the scent on the sheets and the pillow next to me.

The next few days were calm and regular, as before, as if—once again—nothing had happened. Emma never came scratching at my door again. It was enough, each evening, to turn her green-eyed gaze toward mine for a few seconds, exactly as before. I began to grow tired of this stagnant life, of this house, of this landscape, and of these hoods, which no longer intrigued me. One morning I worked it out, I'd been there about six weeks. I thought suddenly of my friends, of my wife who must be looking everywhere for me: my hike was not supposed to last more than two weeks. She must have called the police, reported me missing. Even as I thought of it, there must have been rescue teams beating the bushes of the moor, looking for me. Why hadn't they found this place? I had to get back without delay. A little before noon, I announced to the two women that I would leave after lunch. Emma trembled lightly: she pulled in her shoulders a little, as if she were cold. And the old woman, she simply smiled under her hood, and cocked her head lightly, as if to puzzle out my decision, and asked me if I would just chop some wood before going since fall was coming on and she was no longer strong enough to do it herself. I agreed without hesitation, only too happy to settle up so easily.

I had been working for about a quarter of an hour in front of the house when the door opened and the old woman came out, dragging Emma by the hand. The two women approached me and watched me split into the last log. I set down my tool and watched them too. The old woman dropped her daughter's arm and made a sign with her hand. Then, in one movement, with serious and ceremonial gestures, they slowly lifted their hoods. And what I saw.... what I saw surpassed in horror my wildest imaginings.

The face of Emma was that of an old woman of sixty years or more: graying skin, deeply scared by black wrinkles that made her eyes even more unreal, even more . . . impossibly luminous. The old woman . . . the old woman had the young and regular face her daughter should have had, if you didn't count the two soupy eyes that spoiled it, like two pools of greenish spit in a plate of milk. I don't know why, but it was these eyes that grabbed me. They were made even more fearful by the absolute perfection of the face that surrounded them. I looked at them for a long moment, fascinated by this ugliness and by the powerful impression they emitted. I had the feeling they ordered me to do something, or more precisely they wanted me to make real some impenetrable destiny. There was an instant of indecision. Stunned by this abominable exchange, I looked again at the face of the old woman on Emma's body, the face of Emma on the old woman's body, the eyes of the old woman in Emma's face, and Emma's eyes . . . Finding my voice suddenly, I screamed as loud as I could, from terror, from anxiety, from pain; I no longer know why. And with one sweeping motion, I sliced off the two heads with a single swing of the axe.

Purposefully, I went back to the table, where the breakfast dishes still lay. I took the spoon I had used to stir milk into my coffee a few hours earlier and, kneeling down next to the two bodies lying in the spilling blood, I delicately dug out Emma's eyes. Then I emptied out the sockets of the old woman's face and inserted in their place the two green pearls that still shone a little in the crook of my hand. After that I replaced the reconstituted face on the bloody body of the young woman. Then, I went looking for the photograph I'd seen through the window the first day. I finally discovered it in a drawer of the china closet, and I compared it to the body now swimming in the large red puddle.

These bits of flesh assembled in haste were a fairly accurate reproduction of the real Emmanuelle, who smiled in black and white from the palm of my hand.

I grabbed my backpack, and after a last look at the red and white image of her body, I took off over the moor with Emma.

I ran like a madman for several hours, until I lost consciousness. When I awoke, I was still lying on the ground. There were people around me. I recognized my wife, who gently placed her head on my chest when she saw me open my eyes. While she was silently sobbing, I withdrew the photograph of Emma from my pocket and noticed with stupor and bitterness that her beautiful black and white face was now covered under a hood...

A strange brown hood, in the shape of a blood stain.