

## Between a dog and a wolf

*“With oblivion's obscuration  
fill my senses to the brim,  
make me taste obliteration,  
in this dimness let me dim.”  
(F. Tyutchev, "Dusk", 1835)*

In some movie (whose title I don't remember) an artist confronted with “mermaids don't exist” responds that “everything that has a name exists”. I forgot what the movie was about, but that phrase burned deep into my memory. Though for me, it is the other way around: a thing or an experience does not really “exist” if I cannot find a word (or a phrase) for it. I not only think in words, but also feel and sense “in words”, however ridiculous that may sound. I wish I could transcend this “homemade universe” of words and symbols that Huxley talks about<sup>1</sup>, but I have not yet been able to.

For many centuries people have tried to describe the magic of dusk, so there are countless words and expressions for it across the different languages, each conveying a slightly different sensation. I think my favourite one is French “*entre chien et loup*” (“between a dog and a wolf”); that time of the day when you cannot distinguish between a dog and a wolf. This phrase repeatedly came to my mind as I was contemplating the gloaming (another nice word), and it revived some of my dearest childhood memories.

I used to spend summer holidays in the countryside of Saint Petersburg, in relative isolation and bliss. For a “Steppenwolf”<sup>2</sup> like me, school was always a lonely and miserable place. But here I was in charge: inventing my own games, rules and companions. Summer belonged to me: June with its “white nights” of shimmering twilight; July, when darkness was gradually winning back its territory; and finally August with its swift nightfall. August was a bittersweet month; full of yearning, of realisation that everything eventually comes to an end: a day, a summer, a human life...

There was a dog in our village who was actually a half-wolf (at least according to his owner, a lonely alcoholic woman). His name was Tuman (“Fog” if literally translated into English). The name suited him well; he had a light brownish grey fur, and shy, stealthy and quiet manners. During the day he would guard the house of his owner, like all other dogs (though he never barked). But at dusk I would often see him stride through the fields, with his stealing weary trot. How lonely must he have been! Not really a dog, but not quite a wolf... A part of both worlds and, at the same time, excluded from both. I felt so connected to him in my own loneliness.

I usually played behind our house, overlooking a clearing with dark green bushes in the background and a few big trees on each side. The clearing was covered by a withered grass, yellowish brown, intermingled with some flowers. Those humble field flowers that I love so much, with light pastel colours like in Claude Monet's paintings: blue, lilac, pink, white... I face north-east and the setting sun illuminates the big trees from the left; first bright yellow, then fiery red. The bushes below are

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<sup>1</sup> A. Huxley, “The Doors of Perception”, 1954.

<sup>2</sup> H. Hesse, “Steppenwolf”, 1927.

already in the shade and appear much darker than the trees, but I can still clearly see the outlines of leaves at the tips of the branches – bright green against the dark depth in-between.

When the last sunlight is gone from the big trees, I know that “entre chien et loup” has begun; the time of change, of transformation. The sky is clear blue, almost white. There is some stillness, lingering in the air, as if the world has suddenly stopped in indecision. The silence is only interrupted by soft rustling of the grass in the wind and the occasional mournful cooing of a bird. I look at the flowers. As the night falls, blue and pink disappear, but the white flowers, shy and unremarkable before, suddenly light up, standing out against the darker background – a small triumph against the darkness.

I hardly perceive any change in the bushes and the trees, they just get darker and darker and I can no longer distinguish the leaves, just the brighter patches of closer branches and their solemn mesmerising movement in the wind. I cannot actually hear or feel the wind, I only perceive it in this movement, and there is something deeply unsettling about that... The change in the sky is subtle but unrelenting: first a touch of purple at the bottom (a drop of red wine in a glass of water), then a touch of dark blue (a drop of ink), which gradually spread, mixing into some kind of violet grey – the colour that Caspar David Friedrich captured so well in his night paintings.

Finally, the silent unresolvedness of the twilight is resolved, and the world slides into “the other side”. The sounds come back. Crickets start to chirp. Crows start assembling on the trees – croaking, arguing. The first stars appear in the sky. At this point, I would often see Tuman in the fields – a sudden movement, a dark shadow in the yellow grass. Sometimes he stops and pauses his shimmering yellow gaze on me for a moment, before continuing his trot. These are no longer dog's eyes. As if, in the magic of twilight, the dog in him gradually disappears and the wolf wakes up. What is he looking for in the dark? How does he see the world?

I see the outlines of the trees (almost black now) against the bright sky. The yellowish grass is still very distinctive in front of the dark green bushes. But, is the grass really yellow? Are the trees really green? Or is it because I *know* they are? Do I really know anything? The world is losing its colours. The edges are smudged, the boundaries disappear. Not only of the external objects but also of my own self. Who is “I”? Where am “I”? Am I here, looking at the field, or out there – striding through the darkness? Where do I end and where does the wolf begin?

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