

*The House
of
a Thousand Floors*

Jan Weiss

Translated from the Czech by Alexandra Büchler



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VII

*Again the dream with the yellow lamp · Windows and people
· The inn at the end of the world · The dream merchant*

As he kept falling, to his surprise, that heavy oppressive dream came back. – A yellow lamp with a flame flickering anxiously inside a skull. It doesn't light anything except itself and a yellow circle of dust swirling around it. He dreams that he is lying curled up in a damp, freezing building, his head between his knees. He pushes aside the grey cocoon he is wrapped in. – As his eyes become accustomed to the dim light, as if through a veil, he can see cracked wooden beams crossing above his head unfathomably in all directions. On a suspended platform, people are lying in a tight row, left side up, warming each other in their laps. – But he is no longer a link in this chain; he is lying opposite, by a broken window covered in white frost. – He is cold. He pulls the cocoon back over his head, curls up and wraps himself up in darkness that could be both night and day...

Petr Brok woke up. – With a start, he opened his eyes, and the tormenting illusion disappeared. How long had he been sleeping? He stood up in the lift cage and imme-

diately remembered the previous day. He eagerly grasped the grille as if he wanted to preserve this reality that had preceded that terrible dream with a yellow lamp in the middle of a hollow skull. He felt a painful desire in anticipation of what was to come. With astonishment, he remembered that he was invisible and stepped out of the lift.

He walked through a narrow passage, down several steps, opened a cast iron gate – and found himself in a street. Two rows of buildings, shop signs and pavements. Only one thing was missing here, something that belongs to every street, although nobody notices it... the sky. Instead of the sky, there was a high vaulted ceiling made from a single piece of glass. Underneath it a massive globe glowed, white and unbearable like the sun at its zenith.

Windows and people. – Endless rows of windows and people. Windows that were silent and windows that shout, windows surprised and tearful, enigmatic, yawning with boredom, windows, windows, windows – beckoning, luring, laughing and weeping. – And among them a multi-coloured, effervescent crowd of people rushing in all directions, circulating ceaselessly, a mixture of all human races. The colours of their clothes, skin, eyes and hair all mingle; voices come out of thousands of mouths as if from the pipes of an organ that had escaped from a burning cathedral.

And just as the sky and sun above their heads are both fake, it seems to Brok that all those people, strutting and shouting, have something phoney and monstrously artificial about them. The faces of the men are clean-shaven or covered with beards of various shapes and styles, but many of these appear to Brok to be false, glued on. –

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Some of these people are ostensibly enjoying themselves, laughing for no apparent reason. Others are hurrying somewhere with an expression of anxiety or even terror in their faces. A Chinaman over there is stealthily sneaking below the windows, following someone. And over here, a criminal is on the prowl, with a small black patch over his eye. – A shot sounds behind one of the doors but no-one pays attention. A sailor with a pock-marked face, wearing a black and yellow T-shirt, staggers drunkenly, belting out a lewd song. Three men with bare torsos and black masks covering their faces, arrogantly swagger down the street, daggers behind their belts. The crowd parts in front of them. A row of figures with purple hoods over their heads and round holes for eyes file down the street. – The windows of dancing halls open wide with yellow laughter... Li-la-lo-lu, says a Japanese woman, an ornamental needle stuck in her hairdo, like a dagger piercing a black heart. She is walking arm in arm with a gangster who amuses himself by tripping up old men. As he bares his red-stained teeth, he has just kicked a legless beggar and sent him sprawling over a sewer grate.

A black shop sign screams:

 **DIAMONDS AND COAL** 
F O R S A L E !

A hawker wheezes:

‘OVA’ cube is THE BEST!!!

Jan Weiss

A green and black banner:

| | |
|---------|--------------|
| THE INN | AT THE END |
| | OF THE WORLD |

A small window opens:

No more despair!

Buy KOKA!

Grey days will become rosy!

Cowards will be transformed into heroes!

Defeat will turn into victory!

Violet face powder like a mask on women's faces. Gleaming white teeth, black squares of windows, jingle bells, and, under the red drop of a light bulb, a woman throws around penetrating words, her crude gestures suggesting that she is the seller, the shop and the merchandise all in one:

“Hurry along, young and old.
Before you pass me by
Look at my face!
Notice my hair,
Appreciate the colour of my eyes!
Feel the firmness of my breasts
For free...
Touch my calves
Hard as the rails

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Along which passion speeds!
I am burning, I am burning
For eight argents
I will torture you to death with my love...”

And opposite her, a man with a red forked goatee sits over a rickety table covered with small boxes. Surrounded by several gawkers, he shouts:

Buy dreams!
Guaranteed quality goods!
They last a whole night!

Dreams about gold!
Become a millionaire for one night!
Buy my “Gold Dream”!
Protected trademark!

A single AGA pill
before you go to sleep will guarantee
a night full of love, kisses and embraces
Instructions for use

Special offer! Rosy dreams!
Try one and you’ll come back for more!
No side effects!

Do you want to travel to exotic places?
See palm trees, caravans, savages,
tigers and monkeys?
Buy our EXOTICS tablets

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**Fall asleep on your back with
an ARO pastille
under your tongue
and you'll experience
a plane journey to the sun!**

**Try an ORA pill
to experience
a hurricane for one night
and survive it in the safety
of your bed**

**Are you afraid to journey
to the stars?**

**Is star travel beyond your means?
Dreams can bring you this adventure!
Buy my Stardream for five argents!
Beware of fakes!**

Gigantic signs, moving neon patterns repeating themselves until they make you go mad; advertisements everywhere: on banners, walls, windows, doors, on people's backs and even on their faces. – Paper, colours, glass and human mouths all scream at Brok from all directions, filling his eyes and ears. He had been walking on for a long while, not stepping aside for anyone, amused at the sight of the unsuspecting passers-by who collided with him and jumped, their faces transformed by surprise and terror. He veered to the right following the road. Then he realised that he had been walking in a circle and had returned to his starting point. Only then did he notice the narrow,

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winding streets running from the main circular road onto which the crowds slowly trickled. Metal walls rusty with dampness, windows muzzled with curved grilles. Some streets were so narrow that you could touch the walls with both hands. And there were streets like mountain passes where the walls almost touched and people had to squeeze through sideways, holding their breath and drawing their bellies in.

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Jan Weiss is variously described as an expressionist, a surrealist, an author of fantasy, and as one of the founders of Czech science fiction, alongside Karel Čapek whose futuristic plays and novels such as *R.U.R.*, *The Absolute at Large*, *Krakatit* and *War with the Nents*, are known to English-language readers. Both writers anticipated the post-war development of Czech science fiction and the work of its most prominent authors such as Josef Nesvadba and Ondřej Neff, and both had a disturbingly prophetic vision unparalleled by their successors.

Born in the town of Jilemnice in the Krkonoše Mountains in 1892, Jan Weiss went to high school in Dvůr Králové and enrolled as a law student in Vienna. He had barely completed two semesters when World War I broke out and he was drafted into the Austro-Hungarian Army in 1914 at the age of twenty-two to fight against the Allied forces. In 1916, he was taken prisoner by the Russians and spent the rest of the war in prisoner-of-war camps, notably in the infamous Totskoye camp

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in the Orenburg region in the southern Urals, a location which continued to serve as a camp for Polish prisoners in World War II and was the site of nuclear tests in the 1950s. Jaroslav Hašek, the well-known Czech author of the classic war satire *The Good Soldier Schweik*, was imprisoned in the same camp and it was there that both Weiss and Hašek contracted typhoid fever. After he was rescued and cured, Weiss joined Czechoslovak legions in Russia before returning to his homeland in 1920. He lived in Prague until his death in 1972, working as a public servant and enjoying the support of the Communist establishment which honoured him with several awards, including the Artist of Merit.

Weiss's work consists of short stories, novellas and novels. He first began writing for magazines in 1924 and the title of his very first published story was "Sen" (The Dream), presaging his preoccupation with the relationship between dream and reality characteristic of his early works. He debuted in 1927 with three collections of short stories, *Zrcadlo, které se opožďuje* (The Time Delay Mirror), *Barák smrti* (The Barracks of Death) and *Bláznivý regiment* (The Crazy Regiment).

In the short story "Barák smrti", Weiss drew on his experiences of the prisoner-of-war camp which – rather than the front – dominated the memories of his time in Russia and became one of the key sources of inspiration for his later works. The story "Bláznivý regiment" in a collection of the same name is a satire on the absurdity of war, while the eponymous story of the third collection, *Zrcadlo, které se opožďuje*, is a fantasy in which a mirror reflects whatever takes place in front of it with a time

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delay, revealing moments none of the protagonists expect to become public. He published more story collections in the following years, including *Tři sny Kristiny Bojarové* (Three Dreams of Kristina Bojarová, 1931), *Nosič nábytku* (The Furniture Carrier, 1941) and *Povídky o lásce a nenávisti* (Tales of Love and Hatred, 1944), published during the war, were followed ten years later by *Příběhy staré a nové* (Tales Old and New, 1954).

Weiss began publishing predominantly sci-fi and futuristic stories in the late 1950s and early 1960s: *Země vnuků* (The Land of Our Grandchildren, 1957), *Družiče a hvězdopřavci* (Satellites and Astronomers, 1960) and *Hádání o budoucím* (Guessing at the Future, 1963). His short stories were very popular and continued being republished in different collections throughout the 1960s and '70s and into the 1980s.

He also published a number of novels and novellas, starting with the burlesque fantasy *Fantóm smichu* (The Phantom of Laughter, 1927), followed by the social satire *Mlčení zlaté* (Silence is Golden, 1933) and a critique of a society deformed by capitalism *Spáček ve zvěrokruhu* (The Sleeper in the Zodiac, 1937). Then his psychological novel set in the time of German occupation of Czechoslovakia *Volání o pomoc* (A Call for Help) was published in 1946.

Dům o tisíci patrech (The House of a Thousand Floors) was Weiss's first novel. Published in 1929, it is without doubt his most accomplished and successful work, and it has continued to cast a spell over generations of readers. It was published in numerous re-editions up until the 2000s, all of which came with innovative typesetting and illustrations reflecting the style of the time.

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Weiss was known for repeatedly working with several recurring themes such as the shifting boundaries between dream and reality, both a thematic and structural element which also points to the hallucinatory states of mind induced by typhoid fever with a sense of a hyperreal yet grotesquely warped dream logic he began exploring in “Sen”. The story “Horečka” (Fever), included in his first collection of short stories, is in fact the first draft of the realistic (and autobiographical) storyline of *The House of a Thousand Floors* about a soldier in a prisoner-of-war camp who, like the author, suffers from typhoid fever-induced hallucinations before being rescued and cured. Weiss then elaborated on this storyline by adding the various themes and layers which make the novel so fascinating and unusual: the fairytale theme of Petr Brok’s double mission to rescue Princess Tamara, abducted by Ohisver Muller, the master of Mullerdom, the house of a thousand floors, and to engage in a battle between good and evil by seeking out and eliminating Muller himself.

The idea of Mullerdom belongs within the realms of fantasy and science fiction: the “house of a thousand floors” is both the vertical city of futuristic dreams and a dystopian empire of evil. Complete with a social hierarchy, criminal underworld, stock exchange, casinos and clubs where selected few indulge in decadent search for ultimate pleasures, it is ruled by a dictator who is worshipped as god, the seemingly omnipresent and omniscient Muller, the master of surveillance and manipulator of minds. No-one knows who Muller is or what he looks like, but he has access to everyone in Mullerdom, listening in to every conversation and watching the most intimate moments in the life of its inhabitants.

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Despite the Orwellian echoes apparent to today's reader, Mullerdom is primarily an allegory of capitalist society where ruthless exploitation and degradation of human beings fuels the spread of a revolutionary ideology, hyperbolically charting out a world where workers are fed concentrate containing the minimal nutrients required for bare survival while being deprived of everything that would make them human: spiritual life, love, desire, dignity and a purpose in life. As Brok is told by the first inhabitant of Mullerdom he meets: "We don't know what love is, and that's why our days are endless and there's no future for us except death. We have no sense of taste, we feel no hunger and we have no wishes or dreams, save for one: an amazing longing that torments us and that not even God Muller can take away from us. A longing for death!"

Space travel, a standard trope of science fiction, is another futuristic theme Weiss adopts – with a difference: like the entire house of a thousand floors, it eventually turns out to be the product of a hallucinating soldier's feverish mind, and within that dream – or nightmare – the space travel industry is shown to be a lie, a cruel trick played on the inhabitants of Mullerdom by Universe Company. Their desire to "travel to the stars" makes them victims of Muller's henchmen who strip them of their possessions, enslave them or kill them in what becomes a terrible prophecy of real horrors to come. And it is here that Weiss predicts the Holocaust with its transports, gas chambers and piles of pedantically categorised belongings, in much the same way as Čapek foresaw the use of atomic weapons in his 1922 novel *Krakatit*.

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The novel works with an array of themes favoured by Weiss's contemporaries: part dystopian fantasy, part science fiction, part fairytale with a dash of the crime genre, it is primarily a work of social criticism, less akin to pure science fiction on the one hand and to literary works exploring the Freudian theories of human psychology and the subconscious that became popular at the time on the other – like, for example, another less known Central European classic revolving around the blurred line between dream and reality, *Caliph the Stork* by Weiss's Hungarian contemporary Mihály Babits. Oscillating between hyper-real dream and nightmarish reality, the main storyline of the dream eventually gives in to the reality of a semi-conscious, dying soldier who is rescued and brought back from the dimly lit, louse-ridden camp barracks to a hospital with its soothing, clean white bed, white ceiling and white uniforms of the doctors and “sisters of mercy” who save his life, as if in an act of redemption, just as he wakes from a dream in which he had committed a murder and brought the entire house of a thousand floors crashing down.

With its humanistic message and imaginative power, *The House of a Thousand Floors* is a modern classic that still speaks to readers today as it continues to gather layers of meaning in an ever-extending framework of literary and historical references. It is a unique novel, a masterpiece of more than one genre, unusual and still fresh, that has withstood the test of time for close to a century now.

Alexandra Büchler