



Matthew Cheney

Prague

Matthew Cheney teaches English and theatre at the New Hampton School in central New Hampshire.

He wrote "Prague", he says, after reading parts of a biography of Karel Capek that a friend brought back to him from Prague, and from watching a bunch of Jan Svankmajer's movies one after the other.

"Remember Prague? I asked him. His father had called it the Sepia City, the land of all that is lost, the place where we went for our honeymoon and lived for the rest of our lives in dreams that resembled tattered street maps."

I have never been to Prague," my son says.

"I'm your mother," I say. "Don't lie to me."

He has lied to me ever since childhood, since infancy, in fact, when he crawled, bloody and blind, out from my womb six months late and said, "I love you. I never want to leave you."

Five years after that birth, he built a model of the Eiffel Tower with corn stalks and said, "I dream of other worlds, and I love you, mother."

The next year, he got his first car and his first girlfriend and he drove like lightning and made love like a rabbit — his terms, which he claimed to have thought of himself.

I am old now. He sits beside my bed. "Remember Prague?" I asked him. His father had called it the Sepia City, the land of all that is lost, the place where we went for our honeymoon and lived for the rest of our lives in dreams that resembled tattered street maps.

"You have never been to Prague, either," he says.

His father invented the Dream Machine and sallied forth on a tour of lands near the sky. He lived in the basement of the old farmhouse we'd bought together when we were young, and for the last twenty years he didn't come upstairs. I trekked down into the darkness a few times, but the journey wasn't worth it, because each time I saw him hooked up to his machine, his skin grown black where the wires dug into him, his eyes glassy with the onslaught of what he imagined, my stomach churned



"Remember Prague? I asked him. His father had called it the Sepia City, the land of all that is lost, the place where we went for our honeymoon and lived for the rest of our lives in dreams that resembled tattered street maps."

and my head ached. Each night I prayed to a God I'd forgotten to believe in, prayed for my husband to return to me, because the fields had grown wild and the animals were dead in the barn and our son had run off to Prague.

I've never been to Prague, myself, only looked at the postcard my husband sent me, a black and white picture of a young soldier embracing a beautiful lady, her arm cast behind her like a folded sail.

"Your father loved you," I whisper, the tube in my nose clenching my breath.

"Yes, of course," my son says, lying again. I watch him turn away to the shadow behind him, I see him speak but hear no words. He stands and says he has to go, he has things he must do, he has duties, life.

The Dream Machine waits for him in the basement, I know. It calls to him like an echo, like smoke. He'll be back to visit tomorrow, he says. But I know where he's going, and I know the fields will forever be ruined ... the animals rotting ... the sky a blister of memories ... the city streets a lure for the young, who will wander and revel and dream, an occasional postcard the only memento of all that is lost.

The room is grey now, and the shadows wear white. They circle me and embrace me, they balm my skin and wash my hair, they feed me porridge and water, they refuse to read me bedtime stories, and they tell me I am not in Prague, but I know better. I've always been able to tell when people lie to me.

"I have never been to Prague," he said.

"Then what is this?" I held her postcard in my hand.

"It was all so long ago. A dream, that's all."

They come to me and tell me I have been crying in my sleep. They offer tea and more pills, they offer to call him for me, but I say there's no way to reach him now, it was all so long ago, and he's gone where the dreams build streets and castles, where my son should have been born, but was not.

Night stumbles across me. I hadn't recognized it at first. Tomorrow I will ask him to take me out of here, to get me some fresh air, to let me see the farm again and let me--

If I plead, he will forget me. He will say he will come back, but I know his ways. Instead, I will entrap him. I'll let him think I can forgive him, and I will hold the rusty butcher knife behind me. He will come closer. He will give me a farewell kiss. It will, indeed, be farewell.

They are knocking on my head now, tinkering with my teeth, moving my jaw across the room where I cannot reach it and where it sits on the cabinet calling to me, whispering smoke and drooling ash.

The city was so beautiful in spring.

My eyes roll down my cheeks and plant themselves in the shuddering blanket. Armies of priests plunge bayonets into my knees. My veins seek revenge, wrapping themselves around flagpoles and raining on parades.

Morning sighs and the man with the silver hole in his chest says, "Do you feel better now?"

I climb out of the cornfield and try to look him in the eye, but his eyes twist themselves into mirrors to blind me.

"Can you hear me?" he says, calling up from the basement.

"Your son is here," he says. I laugh.

"Mother," he says, and I reach toward him, but my arms have folded into themselves.

"Bring both flags to my funeral," I say.

Are those tears in his eyes? He has much to be sorry for. Triumph courses through



me, but I scold myself: I don't wish to gloat.

He shivers in the sunlight and spreads himself across the room. The corn blows gently in the wind. The postcard lolls in my hand. I found it in the basement, where he keeps things from me.

Since he left, wind blows through the cracks in the house and coyotes howl at the horizon. I lie down in the dirt and let my tears summon mud. I lock the door and hope they never find him where I left him with the dreams.

"Bury me in Prague," I say. "Under the shadow of the castle, in a place where children come and go. I want to hear their voices."

I am grateful that he doesn't speak this time. When he doesn't speak, he doesn't lie. It's better now that we've learned to live in silence with each other.

The days have grown so short! I see the evening gathering itself, and I hear the coyotes in the distance, getting closer, moving with the moon on a moonless night.

He leans down and kisses me on the forehead.

"I love you," he says, closing my eyes.

It is not a lie.

*"Remember
Prague? I
asked him. His
father had
called it the
Sepia City, the
land of all that
is lost, the place
where we went
for our
honeymoon
and lived for
the rest of our
lives in dreams
that resembled
tattered street
maps."*