

Never After Tomorrow – by Luke Skarth-Hayley

Entry for the What Happens Tomorrow? Competition run by the V&A.

"What's this all about, boss?" Eirle, looking at the black lacquer dining table, the black lacquer chairs. Not real lacquer, from what Berkin can tell. And a split down the middle, a crack through the table, the centre chairs, even the plates. Art piece. Fitting for some snobby architect. It just makes Berkin think back to childhood, to books, to Narnia of all things. The stone table split. A fable of religion. When they'd taken the body away – Swann, the name was – there was no lion in there. Just a frail old man. Wrists and their cuts hidden beneath the slick black of the bag. Wrinkled flesh from a permanent bath.

The stunned suspects, the new owner - Daniel Wilder - and a Wendy Fields, are waiting for interview back at the station.

So what is she here to look at? The scene. And it is a scene. Something overly constructed about it. Far too much intentionality. Artifice, not enough human mess. It is mostly the old man's things, apparently, bought by the younger only recently. Old man with too much time on his hands.

"Boss?" Eirle, giving her a prod. She shakes her head.

"Art," she says.

"Yeah – but what does it mean?"

"Whatever you want it to. Is it really important? Not to the matter at hand anyway."

"Well, don't we need to establish..."

"Establish what?"

"Motive, motivations, if there's evidence of a conflict. Evidence beyond the base material." Eirle gestures vaguely. He's new to all this, a recent transfer. Berkin's new understudy. Smart, but naive. Never a street copper, he'd come up on the fast-stream officer training side, all academia and training.

"Perhaps. The techs got the base physical evidence, the matter close to the matters at hand. But you're right to an extent, considering longer form evidence is needed."

"At a high level, in all things, we're looking for meaning and meaning beyond first blush. Motive and motivation, reason, purpose. Meaning. Ironic, in the home of an architect, surrounded by art. Subjective, and here we are hoping for an objective truth, or a perspective we can pick that tells a story. An explanation, at least."

She looks over. Eirle has a look on his face as if she's just disgorged a whole elephant from her mouth, and it is now wandering the room. She gives a shrug.

"Just look around. Investigate. Look for understanding."

She steps back from the dining table, casts her eyes about the room. There's a lot that is off in the space. She is, she knows, a practical person. Enough of an imagination to see through others' eyes but really, all the constructed meaning here. The fake child in the fireplace. A realistic model of a schoolboy, plaster on knee, arms hugging the knees. Unhappy face. And reflected above, in the eyes of the portrait of the same boy. Swann? It's uncertain. Why would someone luxuriate in their own misery like that? Or worse, if it is the misery of someone else. Either option strikes her.

But she's getting lost now, like Eirle, considering the weight of the things here. She frowns, making for the hallway that leads to bathroom - where the body was found - and beyond to kitchen, study and bedroom.

I was very lost. Beneath the tree, the dog beside me. It had a name but I preferred to think of it as the dog. It was a thing of my parents and even then I was not sure of them. Father with his camera, taking my picture. The sun was out and hot and in my uniform I was uncomfortable. But I did as a good son did, back straight and focused on the camera. Control. Something I would always wrestle with. Something I chose against my own will. That is the nature of control.

Control. Tradition. The weight upon me. Family, duty. Doing what was right. And the things I wanted... They weren't right in the familial eye. Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe, Sullivan, Niemeyer and all those luminaries, that was bad enough to them. But it was their enforcement, their rigidity, which brought me to utopias. Infected with order, I wanted to impose order. Upon myself, and the world. Bring structure.

Of course I had enough trouble with my own nature. Look what I became. Endlessly climbing intellectual heights, but never realising the spaces, the buildings, I strove for. Always damned humanity in its vagaries confounding any sense of logic, failing to follow my arguments and designs. I wanted to break tradition, make a purer control perhaps. At least, that is what I tell myself.

And now I am a ghost, truly, within my own walls. Here with the sound of my own thoughts echoing. I tell myself much, converse with myself often. Who else will listen? Oh there were listeners, and lovers, and others. But listening is wrong. No, I was looking for recognition, for comprehension. And a rare sight it was. Fleeting, and often mistaken.

Wilder was one of those. I thought he had potential. But he let me down, handsome as he was. Another boy, another disappointment. Every one the same. Endless failures. Ceaseless petty intellects who failed to see as I saw, who could not rise for me and rise to the occasion. No stamina, unable to keep the pace. I was done with all of them before long.

They were all lost boys. As I was on that day with the camera. Because of the night before, and nights to come. When my visitor came and took from me. In time I found myself unwilling to give ever again, and to always hold on to control.

Control.

"Just the facts, ma'am," Berkin says, letting it out low, to herself, a mantra. The open door, the scene of the crime. Suicide or otherwise. Eirle at her shoulder. Looking in. White porcelain, dark wood, stains in the plughole. Brass fittings gone to lime scale. A bathroom, not much to be seen. So she moves on, and Eirle still back and to her right, following. She can feel his uncertainty like breath. New ones, always like this.

The kitchen is as empty as a vacant lot. A – what? – workstation, worktop, in the middle with isolated hob elements, a sink with a faucet more at home in a slaughterhouse than anywhere of human habitation. She feels a tug of appeal. Simple is her thing. Anything more is messy. Minimal is okay, because it means she doesn't have to think about it so much. And these days she likes to think as little as she can when she is allowed.

"Wilder had this fitted," Eirle says, "Bought the place and this is the first thing he had changed. Man likes to eat?" He looks down at a stack of Dominos boxes, prodding them with his foot. "Well, eat. But no accounting for taste, eh?" He looks up.

"Is it relevant?" Berkin asks.

"Not likely I guess," Eirle says.

"Then keep looking." Berkin looks up from him, noticing a clock. Second had free and ticking, but the minute and hour hands taped down in a permanent half past five.

Irrelevant again, perhaps, but more eccentricity. The place reeks of it.

Berkin looks to the right, to an enclosed space in white wooden-framed windows. A study. Swann's space, again, that faded glamour. A chaises longues, a place to lie and think. She has a flash of the wrinkled corpse, the hidden wrists, lain out as on the coroner's table. And a look over her shoulder at the kitchen, the body again but on the worktop. Spend enough times with bodies and they just start turning up everywhere, real and unreal, of their own accord.

Something that comes, she thinks, with too much thinking. Or whatever it is she does with all this stuff she absorbs. The vulture, stuffed and leering in the study, doesn't help with these thoughts.

Swann, though. Suicide in his 70s. And the wrists of all things. Up and not across. Knew what he was doing. But what a sad, what a melodramatic, way to go.

Maybe.

So Wilder and the girl – Fields – from the club said. Wilder and Swann had a history. That much was obvious. Student and master. And something else there. What kind of student would buy the home out from under the master's feet? Swann had had money troubles, but Wilder clearly had some motive at play in buying the apartment. Did it translate to a motive of another kind?

And then as she walks into the bedroom it is obvious. Low lights, heavy curtains still pulled shut. She pulls them aside. Dust cut in shafts of light. And beneath the basics, the old-world decor, there's the obvious message. Sex. Men. Male figures. A piano in the middle, pictures of family stacked across it but shirtless men too, and a horse with an erect penis.

A fig leaf, some kind of sculpture in a glass case on the wall, bulging with unseen manhood. Black lacquer again on the furniture and the bed's frame, now associated in her mind with something seedy and less Narnian. And overt motions towards Swann's orientation and predilections.

Which is just fine, she supposes, if a little crass for a man who, up front and in the rest of his home, seems - seemed - a little more nuanced and cultured. But here it's all sex and darkness and lusts and obvious. And a vulture again, of all things, gold and watching over the bed from one of the posts. Sex and death.

Prosaic, really. But who isn't, in the end?

Confusion was my other constant. All my life. And what I mistook for friendly pats on the back, for the kindness of lovers, were really hands pushing me down, holding me back. One can see, with time and distance, with perspective, how that might twist intentions.

Professional evil. Is that what one would call it? The abuse of power for personal gain. And I confess, guilty as all sin, to using my power. I had something he wanted and, well, vacuous as he was and would prove further to be... he was such a lovely looking empty vessel. A thing I wanted, a thing to fill.

I was human, after all. Despite all my efforts to the contrary. Towards modernism, to my philosophy, to the position of the intellect and control. Always control. I was trying to enforce something; on myself, on others. A linearity. Clean lines.

Perhaps Wilder was right, this ending night. Ideas, and nothing concrete. Concrete – ha – what irony. I had failed to bring my philosophy to reality. Or to truly exert my will over it, and over others.

That was what I wanted with Wilder, after a fashion. His body, and his mind. To pull him from his mediocre thoughts, raise him to a level I had set for myself and for others. To assert my will, argue him from his intellectual slumming. And the rest. To make them realise. And for all my arguments, what did I achieve? Naught. Just a lecturer, never a maker. Would the creation, the realisation of my designs, have been the true argument? Would they have listened then?

From here everything looks so very uncertain.

And casting back again, to boyhood. That lack of control. Those times, multiple, where control was taken from me. When I had no say.

I am so very tired. So glad, I confess, to find myself at the end. Maybe now I can read my obituary. I have spent long enough in a half-life, a faded existence. Now I may really fade. Let the wild boy and his woman have this place and have each other in it. I have had enough and I am gone.

In this disinfected whiteness, the porcelain lines... I could almost see this as some part of an unrealised building. Is this enough for me? It will have to be.

Enough.

Berkin looks up, seeing a rocking horse and other childhood elements above the wall-length wardrobe furthest from the bed. And she wonders, and feels a shudder. Hidden and in sight at once. The schoolboy, the toys. Something in Swann's childhood? She feels a crawling on her neck and needs to be somewhere else. She goes out, back to the study. Eirle, faithful pup, at her heels. He's starting to grate too.

She busies herself in going through objects, letters, across the long desk of the study. Trying not to think. Not to over-analyse

"See this?" Berkin holds up a model, a spiral staircase leading up to nothing. Or down from nothing. Just a staircase, in and of itself, cut from its function. Form without function, and her palms itch.

"Yeah?"

"I've seen this already, or something like it. Another stairway in here somewhere." Berkin stalks back, eyes scanning across the walls, the surfaces, the cluttered account of this dead man's life. So many things, divorced from the clean lines of his architectural models. Personal clutter, professional purity. Something like that? She finds it a lot simpler to be clean in both. Things weigh on you, the more you have. Swann seemed the type who had carried a lot on his back.

The bedroom, with its barely suppressed sex. The endless paper and card models in the study. The boxes of a refused absence. The clinical kitchen does not count, a Wilder thing thrust as a phallic chromed shiv into the side of Swann's home. Intentional, built to assault the man in his home?

Wilder had, she is given to understand, babbled drunkenly and incoherently. A talker, but content free. The chances, she knows, of getting anything direct from him as to what was going on between Swann and him was minimal.

Now where is it?

She continues through, tracing back through the apartment, looking for the other stairs, the other move to nowhere.

"That's it then, I guess," Eirle, with the need to say something, assuming they are leaving. And, Berkin supposes, they are. She nods slow, a single tipping of the head. The

hallway, something taken whole it seems to her from a stately home, is the space she least had a problem with. The forest green, the canes and umbrellas in their skeletal holder by the front door, the chairs. Echoes of something old and so very English. A part of traditionalism she doesn't have a problem with. A soft, dark sort of peace to be found in those shades and shapes.

And there it is.

Far back corner, away from the front door, away from the way to the dining/living room. A framed drawing. A staircase, no detail beyond the staircase itself. A black line drawing in white space. Smooth curving pattern on the first, lower, half, then a switchback for the upper half, railing describing diamonds, rigid geometrics. And nothing above. Another staircase going nowhere.

Swann, a man very much going nowhere. And he knew. The stairs. The fucking awful vultures, even, over his study and over his bed. Inflicting his own absence on himself. Symbols of wanting his own guts pulled from his body. He knew it. She could feel it. Did he kill himself? Did Wilder do it for him? Assisting or was he galled to it? Suicide by murder?

There was a perversity to this place, hardly subtle. Swann struck her as the sort who would take perverse pleasure in his own death at the hands of his student, and perhaps given his preferences they had been involved and so it was a slow detonation, a decades-long crime of passion waiting to detonate. Another phallus, a bomb, this one lodged in Wilder's brain from Swann's... tutelage, and whatever else there once was or had remained between them.

"There's no clear answers here," she says, "That is indeed it. Let's go."