



Büdenau in October

Robert Daseler

The surface of the lake reflects cloud, a stone lid on the earth. Trees upon its banks cast blurred shadows on the not-quite-motionless water. Yellow leaves are scattered like playing cards on the ground. Dusk advances noiselessly; the only sound to be heard is the splashing of a marble fountain. The park was popular before the war, but now it is seldom visited, except in summer, when young families picnic on the grass. Summer, like the afternoon, has lapsed, and soon the park will close for the winter. Of course somebody must tend it, trim the hedges and rake up leaves occasionally, but no caretakers are evident at this hour. In fact, except for two or three elderly couples strolling its paths in silence, the park is virtually empty. These elderly couples possibly remember the park in its earlier days, before the war, and come here to revive in memory a more romantic and hopeful era. This seems to be suggested by the way they stop at a parapet overlooking the lake and lean upon it for a few minutes, addressing an indeterminate distance with unseeing eyes.

It is, in any case, a sort of out-of-the-way destination, a quarter of a mile from the nearest town. It was once the demesne of a noble family that dominated this valley for centuries. A manor house supposedly stands on the farther side of the hill to the east, but I have never seen it. I don't believe it is open to the public, and it may still be occupied by descendants of the former owners of all this property, the noble family that eventually frittered away its wealth. I have never troubled myself to look into the matter. Everything I know about it, or think I know, has come to me as hearsay, much of it passed on by the woman who runs the bed-and-breakfast house in which I usually stay, Elisaveta Linsmayer, who answers my questions as best she can, although she herself is not a native of this region.

My attention is beguiled by the almost imperceptible movements of shadow on the surface of the lake, which resembles frosted glass behind which vague shapes are coalescing. I am reminded of dreams I had in childhood, although I could not, even as a child, bring the fragments of those dreams into focus when I awoke. A housekeeper my parents employed while we were living in Houston assured me that I had been dreaming of hippopotamuses, but I did not quite believe her. She said that hippopotamuses roamed the streets of Houston after dark. When my parents realized that she was frightening me, they dismissed her. We lived in Houston for only a year, I believe, or possible for two years, and today my only distinct impressions of the city include the lugubrious images of hippopotamuses hulking down its darkened avenues.

What sort of life has it been that has led me from the hippopotamus-haunted precincts of Houston to a dusky park in Austria? Like my dreams, my past is diffuse, each part attached to the others by attenuated threads, like a ball of cotton being torn asunder by uncertain fingers. My family moved about a lot when I was a child, seldom settling anywhere longer than two years. I graduated from a college. I was employed both in the "public sector" and in the "private sector," and I frequently traveled on business to major urban centers in the U.S. I attended three or four reunions of my college class, although I cared next to nothing for the careers and families of my classmates, none of whom had done anything particularly noteworthy after graduation. I think I went in the hope of discerning some glimmer of my former self in the way my classmates regarded me, but that never happened. They had become strangers, as was the person I had been when they were my chief society.

I discovered the park quite by accident about ten years ago while driving through the valley in a rented car, heading in the direction of Salzburg. There was a man in a Panama hat smoking a cigar near the entrance, and as soon as I caught sight of him the reverie with which I had been distracting myself abruptly dissipated. He was leaning against a stone pillar, I think, although my memory of him has been diluted by time and subsequent events. On an impulse I pulled the car to the side of the road, killed the engine, and got out, as if to stretch my legs. In truth I was already intrigued by the play of sunlight in the trees that formed a canopy over a broad lawn that was just visible from where I was standing. The darkness of the lawn contrasted with the brightness of the sky, which accommodated only a few traveling white clouds that afternoon. I soon noticed a booth just beyond an entrance between two high stone walls, and in

that booth was a uniformed person—a female, it appeared—from whom one presumably could buy a ticket to enter. I got back into my rental car, revived the engine, and executed a U-turn on the otherwise somnolent highway in order to enter the park. As I recall, the admission fee at that time was two or three schillings, which I happily paid to a lady in a fawn-colored jacket with epaulets, foreign money being, essentially, pretend money. There was a grassy parking lot not far from the tollbooth, and there I left the rental car for, if I remember correctly, a couple hours, and I strolled into the park, motivated only, as far as I could tell, by a whim. Such maneuvers change our lives in ways we can never fully comprehend.

However it may have been, I began to feel, as I walked up a smooth asphalt path that brought me eventually to the lake, not that I had been there before, no, but that this secluded, sylvan place had been waiting for me to discover it, waiting possibly for a time longer than my own life. I wasn't coming home; rather, I was being released from any sense of home that had possessed me up to then. A kind of wobbly excitement extended itself from my chest to my extremities, not entirely unlike the excitement I had felt as a youth when kissing a girl and beginning to surmise that she would allow things to go beyond kissing. Everything within the park was perfectly ordered, still, and conducive of calm. The paths were swept clean. There were no stray leaves lying about, and even the shadows under the trees seemed to be carefully tended. A couple birds were singing somewhere, but I did not recognize their songs. No doubt they were European birds of an order not common in the western United States, where I lived. They sounded, I thought, more musical than the avian songsters of Texas. Though it was still summer by the calendar, under the trees of the park the air was no more than comfortably warm and humid. The elevation of Büdenau surely accounts for its comparatively temperate summers.

Bicyclists passed me, sometimes turning in their seats to look at me from close range. I knew myself to be easily identifiable as American: my shoes and clothes proclaimed my nationality, as did my haircut and the very way I strode along the path. I think my Americanness showed even in the way I cleared my throat, smiled when a smile was slightly inopportune, averted my gaze from certain things, and swung my arms while walking. Europeans have learned to identify Americans at a single glance.

Here and there families picnicked on blankets spread upon sunlit stretches of lawn, and small children stalked pigeons until the birds, exasperated, flew away. Babies dozed between lolling parents. Boys who were too restless to sit with their elders chased one another through patches of light and shadow. All of this was familiar, of course. There are public parks in Austin, too, and children play in them.

I observed that in sheltered corridors under the trees there were ferns and broad-leafed plants of a kind I had only seen in botanical gardens back home, and at one point I was surprised by a yellow-and-black butterfly that wafted almost into my face. I might have caught it in my hand if I had wished. Velvety light-green mosses grew on the sun-shy backs of trees. The earth under the foliage on either side of my path gave off a faintly musky scent, not entirely dissimilar

to that of a locker in a men's gym. It was distinctly different, though, from the smell of damp soil in Texas.

I sat down on a wooden bench, stretched out my legs, and let my mind play over the events of the day, which consisted mostly of driving on anfractuous two-lane roads through rising green country. I had stopped somewhere for an unsatisfactory lunch of sausages and beer, both of which still lay on my stomach like roadwork, and I had driven through half a dozen hamlets and towns, but I remembered none of their names. I had a reservation at a hotel in Salzburg, and I intended to stay there for at least two nights, but now a sort of lassitude crept over me, like a tenacious vine ensnaring a recumbent knight in a fairytale, and I repeatedly postponed the moment I would resume my exploration of the park. I don't think I had realized until that moment how fatigued I was, drained by the flight across the Atlantic, of course, and possibly suffering from jetlag, but also wearied by my life and its obligations. Just the knowledge that in something short of two weeks I would have to report again for work at my office in Austin and seat myself at a desk on which lay the paperwork I had left unfinished. . . just this thought, the image of my desk lurking at the back of my consciousness, enervated me. I am sure a million office workers on ten million summer vacations have felt as I did at that moment, piqued by a wee sip of freedom and stifled by the impossibility of drinking more deeply. I was tempted to curl up on that bench and go to sleep. But then I reminded myself that I was in a German-speaking country, where sleeping on park benches is *polizeilich verboten*. I would be locked up in an Austrian dungeon and fed sausages and sauerkraut twice a day, until the nearest American consulate got around to looking into the matter, which might take weeks or months.

I think I fell asleep, my chin dropping onto my chest. Nobody disturbed me. When alertness revived, it was appreciably darker than it had been. The sky directly overhead was still blue, but it had advanced one or two stops along the scale toward purple. The air was still humid and warm, but there was a stillness on it now that I had not noticed earlier. I saw nobody on the grass or on the pathway approaching my bench, and I heard no human voices, though my ears did catch faint notes of unfamiliar birdsong. Somewhat refreshed, I stood up and, feeling that a little exercise would do me some good, I continued to climb the gentle slope into the park. My path curved around a thick stand of trees, and it was then that I caught my first glimpse of the lake, the surface of which was perfectly empty, and the marble fountain on its farther shore. There was a kiosk of some sort on that side of the lake, too, though at first I failed to notice it. At this point I felt a cool breeze on my face. It lifted the hair from my brow and ears—I wore it longer in those days than I do now—and I realized that I must have been perspiring a little during my brief somnolence, and that discovery reminded me that I should never imbibe alcohol, even in moderate quantities, at lunch, for that always leads to my feeling logy afterward.

I proceeded along the path that took me around one end of the lake, which was, I estimated, no more than three hundred yards across at its widest point, as far as I could see, although there was, as I was to learn, no vantage point on the ground from which the whole lake was visible. It was more in the nature of a large pond than of a lake, though I have known even

smaller bodies of water to be called lakes. It occurred to me that this would be an excellent location for a murder, as it would be unlikely that anybody would witness the act. The body could be weighted with rocks and pushed quietly into the water. Possibly the rocks could be put into the victim's pockets. How many rocks would it take to sink a body? Perhaps the victim would oblige enough to wear a raincoat with large pockets, and then the raincoat would have to be buttoned up.

I was thus working through, in my mind, the perfect murder as I rounded the end of the lake farthest from the entrance to the park. Two bicyclists startled me, coming upon me unexpectedly from behind and passing me with just the sound of their gears clicking. They neither spoke to me nor looked back at me as they passed, and they were gone within a few seconds. So maybe this was *not* the ideal spot for murder. I was somewhat relieved, for surely I was a more likely victim than a perpetrator of homicide.

The kiosk, when I reached it, proved to be closed up, its corrugated metal shutter having been lowered and locked into place, but there were a few scraps of paper on the ground in front of it—bits of napkin, I thought, or wrapping for some kind of food—and this was the *only* place in the park in which I had seen the smallest evidence of trash. No doubt if I returned to the park the next day, these remnants of human carelessness would have been whisked away by the same invisible caretakers who kept the paths unnaturally tidy.

I found another bench and sat down. I had not walked far enough to tire myself, but somehow I *was* tired. I am not ordinarily prey to superstition or to the deification of human contingencies as Fate or God's design, but I began to feel that I had been led to this spot for some purpose, and I should not leave until I divined what it was. Why had I come to Austria in the first place? Most of my acquaintances go on vacation to Italy or to England or Japan. I know a fellow name McLeod who spends two weeks in Scotland every summer. At what point had I decided to go to Austria? Nobody goes to Austria unless they pass through it as they travel south from Germany. Indeed, my first intention, as I recollect, had been to go to Piedmont on my annual vacation. If you live in the flatness of the American middle, swept in winter by winds originating in Canada, you may develop a hankering for mountains. Upon consideration, though, I had concluded that I didn't know enough about Piedmont, except that it is in northern Italy, where there are mountains, and it borders on the French Alps. Whereas Austria, well, Austria once had its own empire, and it was a major player until World War I. Hitler and Wittgenstein were Austrian. Austria gives you something to conjure with.

The lake and its surround might have been a very large and elaborate movie set. The crew might walk into the scene at any moment and begin rearranging the light, and actors with their makeup freshly touched up would stand about with plastic bottles of water in their hands. The splashing of the fountain was a kind of background music, repetitive but irregular, and now the breeze that I had felt moments earlier returned. What the scene needed, I thought, was a carousel, very brightly painted in primary colors, its horses leering madly and revolving slowly. That's what *I* would have added to the scene. And then the actors, when they appeared, would be

in the costumes of circus performers, and they would cavort and gambol in the wan light, players vainly trying to revive a defunct hilarity. I saw it all on my mind's screen.

But there was only the closed-up kiosk and the splashing of the fountain, and of course the lake, itself, with its feebly lapping waters, the silver glints on its surface diminishing by the minute. Yes, I thought, I had been called to this place, though the reason for my vocation might never be revealed. Possibly we are not meant to unbundle and peruse our deeper purposes, only to execute them.

Instead of continuing on to Salzburg, as I had originally intended, I stopped for the night at a bed-and-breakfast house in nearby Büdenau, and before returning to the park I ambled about the town. I did not know Austria well enough to say what was typical and what was not, but Büdenau looked much like other Austrian towns through which I had passed, here and there a little too self-consciously "picturesque," but pleasing to the eye, on the whole, and of course very tidy. Compared to almost any American town, it appeared to be almost too spruce. The townspeople were not, thank God, dressed in Lederhosen, or anything like that, they didn't all wear Tyrolean hats, and they didn't break spontaneously into song or yodel.

The park had reawakened from intervening night by the time I returned the following morning. The woman in the tollbooth grimaced rather than smiled as she took my money and handed me a ticket. The day was yet cool. There were several cars in the parking lot, but there were few people on the paths, and I saw no picnickers. The reflection of sunlight off the surface of the lake was blinding, but the kiosk was open; it was selling ice cream cones to those who delighted in that kind of thing, but business was slack. There was but one customer waiting to be served, a young woman, rather pretty. The fountain's operation had not altered since the previous afternoon, but it was somehow brighter and more cheerful. Was it shut off overnight, or was its frolic uninterrupted and eternal?

I found an unoccupied bench and sat down. I was not fatigued, as I had been the day before; rather, I was a little light-headed. The sense that I had been led to this place for some intelligent purpose settled on me almost as a conviction, though I knew, of course, that this was utterly irrational. I am not a mystic. I don't believe in unseen forces shaping our destinies. Indeed, I consider destiny to be a conception seized upon by people desperate to find some pattern in their lives and, if need be, to enforce that pattern, using the random elements provided. What possible purpose could there be in my stopping at a park beside a highway in Austria? As I sat there, though, I could not shake the feeling that had come over me. I have read of people who, as they are passing a church or cathedral, feel an urge to enter and, having entered, to sit at a pew inside and, after a moment, perhaps, to kneel and mutter something with their lips, though they do not know a single prayer. I have regarded such accounts as being an emotional form of a severed limb that aches. People instinctively yearn for the religious convictions they have lost or possibly never had. Was I experiencing something of that sort? If so, I must have been yearning for a pantheistic or very primitive set of beliefs, one that found speaking consciousness in bodies of water and trees.

Well, I proceeded to Salzburg that afternoon, a day later than previously planned, and though I had lost my reservation at one hotel, I soon found a room at another. I had never been in Salzburg before. It is a gorgeous city with steep mountains on every side and a very pleasant river, the Salzach, running through it. In the Altstadt there are medieval buildings that are still intact. Mozart was born in Salzburg. After two nights I proceeded to another town, and then another after that, and soon it was time for me to fly home.

The following summer, owing to complications in the publication of a periodical of which I was a contributing editor, I was unable to take my vacation until early October. As soon as possible, I booked a flight to Dallas-Ft. Worth and flew thence to Vienna, where I rented a car and drove until I was in Büdenau again, drawn by impulses I chose not to resist. I was a single man. I had no other exigent obligations. I could afford to indulge my whims. Returning to the same bed-and-breakfast establishment at which I stayed for one night, fourteen months earlier, I felt a little self-conscious. All the other guests, on that previous occasion, had been Austrian or German (as far as I could tell), and I didn't imagine that Americans often stopped in Büdenau, as delightful a town as it undoubtedly was. Frau Linsmayer, the proprietress, had a practical command of English, and I had taken two years of German in college, so communication, though not without its difficult patches, was not a major obstacle. Her face showed surprise when I said I would stay a week, "*wenn das möglich ist.*" But then she nodded: "*Es ist möglich.*"

The room she assigned me, "Amarant," overlooked a little garden. Most of the flowers were out of season now, but a few withered petals clung to the rosebushes, and there were mauve leaves atop the stalks of another flower I could not identify. My double bed was comfy, with a hard mattress and a quilted blanket, and there was a framed watercolor on the wall of purple hydrangeas.

On the morning after my arrival, I returned to the park. I was dressed in a bright red jacket and blue jeans, my habitual casual wear in cool weather. The morning air was bracing but not biting cold. Everything in the park was in place—the lake, the kiosk, the fountain—but it was less populated than it had been in summer. There seemed to be three or four other people on the path leading to the lake or on other paths, but I only glimpsed them at intervals. It was too chilly to sit on the bench longer than a minute or two, so I walked up and down. The kiosk was shuttered, but on the fountain water danced, and diffuse sunlight, along with a hovering mist, made the lake look smaller than I remembered it. The tinkling of the fountain sounded tinnier and brassier than in summer.

I followed another path that took me away from the lake and up the slope of a hill. At the crest I was able to look out over the valley, which was a lighter shade of green than it had been in summer, and I could see the rooves of Büdenau amongst and above distant treetops. The rooves were almost uniformly slate or a leaden gray. On the far side of the valley loomed a hill higher than the one on which I stood, and it appeared to be densely forested. I did not recognize any of the verdure at my feet, intertwined vines and bushes, some of the latter as high as my shoulders and with spiny leaves.

I walked back to my car but returned later in the day. I began going to the park later and later in the day. I slept later into the morning, too, often missing breakfast, although Frau Linsmayer set aside fresh fruit for me, and she kept a pot of coffee warm.

I have made a practice of coming back to Büdenau every October, my favorite month, and late afternoons have become my favorite time to wander in the park. I do not know at what hour it closes, or even if it closes. The sky is almost always occluded with cloud, which means that the ground is only faintly shadowed until evening, which comes early in the valley, as the sun sets behind mountains in the beyond, and shadows at last arise from amongst the trees while the brooding sky is still glowing like ash on a dying fire.

Robert Daseler's full-length plays, *Dragon Lady* and *Alekhine's Defense*, have been staged by South Coast Repertory in Costa Mesa, California. The University of Evansville published a collection of his sonnets, *Levering Avenue*, and his essays, short stories, and poems have appeared in numerous journals.