



Wu Ming 4

{ Il Piccolo Regno }

una storia d'estate

ASSAGGI DI NARRATIVA BOMPIANI







WU MING 4 THE LITTLE KINGDOM

translated from the Italian
by Licia Vighi

SAMPLE COPY

BOMPIANI



*To Fabrizio Casadio (1973-1992)
for that final summer*

*To Sir Jonah and Sir Ishmael,
for facing their ghosts.*



All these are vanished clean away,
And the old manse is changed to-day;
 It wears an altered face
 And shields a stranger race.
 The river, on from mill to mill,
Flows past our childhood's garden still;
 But ah! we children never more
Shall watch it from the water-door!
 Below the yew--it still is there—
Our phantom voices haunt the air
 As we were still at play,
And I can hear them call and say:
 “How far is it to Babylon?”

R.L. Stevenson, *To Minnie*

...Then is not death at watch
Within those secret waters ?
 What wants he but to catch
Earth's heedless sons and daughters ?

Edmund Blunden, *The Midnight Skaters*



A FORWARD FOR TALL PEOPLE

The photograph has survived for all these years. Sepia coloured, yellowed at the edges. The man, the woman and the child watch from the window of time past, and I am still there, with my father and mother, whom I remember perfectly. And yet it's not me, it's another me, one who has been swept away by destiny and is no longer able to act, who is looking at me as if to ask what I have become instead of him.

And I find myself thinking that if it weren't for the discovery of the tomb, if I had been elsewhere in that moment, my exit from the Little Kingdom would have been very different. Perhaps no less difficult, but certainly more like that of many others. My departure would have ended up taking place on a late summer's day, in an abrupt collision with everything that was out there, waiting.

My cousin Julius was the first to leave the kingdom this way. When I discovered I had to lower my head to get into our little wooden house, it was as if a countdown had begun. From that point on, every time we entered our refuge, we measured how many more centimetres it would take for us to touch the door frame, so we would know how much longer we had left.

Years later, when I returned to visit what was left of the kingdom, the house was still standing, covered in ivy, under the old elm tree. I didn't even try to bend over and get in, as I knew I would have got my trousers dirty. If I were a child it wouldn't have bothered me in the slightest. This is what a good upbringing does to you.

A little further over, next to the rose garden, was the exact point in which, many years before, I had made my first discovery. It wasn't actually so many years before, though it felt like a century, before the first kiss and the first cigarette. Before the war. Because there is always a war to administer a baptism by fire. It had been the same for our parents and our grandparents.

And yet, something had anticipated my entrance into the conflicts of life and history.

The Little Kingdom had been weakened from within, it had disintegrated under the weight of a conspiracy of silence. For this reason, when I left it I felt I was losing something diminished, although I knew full well that I would come to miss those days. Perhaps not immediately and perhaps not even after a while. But sooner or later. It would be the sign that something more than adult age was peeking out, along with the first grey hairs. Today all of my hair is grey, and increasingly sparse, and the far-sightedness of memory favours the remote past with greater precision than the recent one. The last century rather than the one that has just begun. As a result, we end up with a better memory of the events of our childhood than those of our adult life. We go back to the beginning before becoming someone's memory, a photograph in a family album. We sense that in order to mourn the ultimate loss, our own, we must be able to make peace with the children we left in the garden of childhood without ever looking back.

This explains why I have decided only now to tell the tale of that ancient summer. How I dug out the entrance that led me

to the heart of a secret. Even the darkest and most unnerving details, which I have never shared with anyone except my cousins. Because, whether you believe it or not, some truly inexplicable things happened over the course of that summer, and it hardly matters that adult age then arrived to sort everything out, to cover up every entrance to the cave and to shatter the mirror. It hardly matters that we came much closer to the spectre of death in the years that followed, on the battle fields, during the bombing raids, or even later, next to a hospital bed.

When I think back to the events of that time, my blood still runs cold and those old shivers run down my spine once again.

What scares us as children scares us forever.



PART ONE
Frontiers & Inhabitants



1

THE OLD MILL

It was a red-brick building, hidden among the trees and immersed in silence. It looked abandoned.

Julius ventured forward, ignoring Ariadne's warnings. Fedro and I were left in the rear, and, carefully looking around, we moved warily to the clearing in front of the mill. The windows were closed, there was no guard dog, no laundry hung out to dry. However, the mill was turning, so we went to look at it. That perpetual, circular movement, with its liquid murmur, had something unnerving about it.

"What's it for?" asked Fedro.

"It turns the millstone," Julius answered.

"Where's that?"

"Inside. Where do you think it is?"

"Can we see it?"

We exchanged glances, then we looked around. A marsh bird was fishing in the shallow water by the bank; the frogs splashed about, the dragonflies darted among the reeds. Each one in pursuit of their own prey. Silence. We could have been the only human beings in the world.

"What if it's someone's house?" I ventured.

“Can’t you see it’s empty?” Julius said.

“Maybe the miller comes here every so often to grind the grain and then he goes.”

“Just knock,” Ariadne said.

Julius made a sign of approval.

“I’m scared,” said Fedro.

I stood next to him whilst Julius walked up to the door. He banged the door lightly. Silence. He tried again. Still silence. He turned the handle: it was locked.

I breathed a sigh of relief.

At that moment Ariadne pointed to a window.

The glass and the frame were broken. Julius didn’t waste any time, he put his hands together and hoisted his sister up to the windowsill.

“What can you see?”

“Barely anything. It’s too dark. A table, a couple of chairs...”

“Try to get in. Then you can open the door for us.”

Ariadne was a brave girl. When she disappeared inside, out of sight, my heart dropped and the anxiety stayed with me until I heard the key turning in the lock and saw her appear on the doorstep.

“Come on in.”

Julius had to stop himself from embracing her.

Fedro and I followed her inside, in search of something interesting.

It was one large room, immersed in half-light, though our eyes soon grew accustomed to the darkness. The mill’s structure took up one side of the building: a flywheel and a gear mechanism that turned the mill. Not at that moment, to tell the truth, because the larger wheel wasn’t inserted, but it was easy to understand how it worked. There was dust everywhere, most likely flour.

Julius found a pair of incredibly long rubber boots in the

corner, the ones used by fishermen, and he tried to put them on, giggling to himself. Ariadne tried to weigh Fedro on the lever scales, but they couldn't agree on the position he should take up.

I rounded a pile of cloth bags and discovered a camp bed. It was low and very long. The person who used to sleep there must have been some kind of giant.

I called the others and we stood there contemplating the cot, allowing our imagination to run wild, thinking of the strangest of beings sleeping there, without knowing how close we were to the truth.

Fedro said that we had better get going. Julius, however, had just discovered the lever that worked the mill and got it into his head to get it working. I knew that the fastest way to get out of that ominous place was to indulge Julius, get the mill working and then stop it, goodbye and thank you very much. Whilst we were lost in our endeavour, the door swung open and appeared the ogre.

It was an incredibly tall, imposing being. His beard was pitch black and his eyebrows were two bushes hanging over surly eyes. His arms hung low at his sides, almost reaching his knees, and ended with enormous hands.

Fedro went to scream, frozen to the spot, Ariadne put her hand over her mouth. Julius and I dropped the lever and threw our backs against the wall.

"Who are you? What are you doing here?"

The voice was more like a growl.

"Nothing. We thought no-one lived here," Julius found the courage to answer. But his words came out tiny, caught in his throat.

The ogre growled threateningly. He occupied the whole of the doorway; it was impossible to slip away.

"This is private property. What are your names?"

At this moment I had a stroke of genius, of the kind that doesn't happen very often in life, four or five times at most. It was mostly thanks to the fact that my mother often read me passages from the Iliad and the Odyssey before bedtime.

"We are the Williamson brothers," I lied without hesitation.

The ogre took a step forward and lowered himself ever so slightly to examine me closer in the half-light.

From the way in which he was squinting his eyes it was clear his eyesight wasn't great. I was almost certain that he hadn't noticed Ariadne and Fedro yet, who were up against the side wall. He moved forward, leaving the doorway clear. There was no time to lose. I screamed the order to retreat.

I dodged past the ogre to the left, Julius took the right, and we moved towards the exit, preceded by Ariadne and Fedro. Once we were outside we started to run and didn't stop until our lungs were burning.

We had made it out. This was the only thought I managed to formulate whilst gasping, lying flat out on the grass.

Fedro actually managed to speak.

"Would he have eaten us?" he asked.

"Worse, even," Julius responded.

"Let's never come back here again..." Fedro implored.

Ariadne stood up and looked towards the Old Mill.

"He didn't shout after us."

"Should he have?" I asked.

"Wouldn't you?" she snapped back.

She didn't wait for an answer. As usual, she left us pondering over her observation as she headed home.



Wu Ming 4 The Little Kingdom

IL PICCOLO REGNO

A summer tale. Four boys in the English countryside, the ghost of a warrior awakened from his sleep, a season in which everything changes.

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Wu Ming 4 is a member of the Wu Ming collective of writers – authors of the novel *Q* (Einaudi 1999) under the pseudonym “Luther Blissett”. Besides the group novels (*54*, *Manituana*, *Altaï*), Wu Ming have also written solo novels, travel stories, reportages and essays on literature. Each member has adopted a nom de plume composed of the collective name plus a number. Wu Ming 4 is the solo author of the novel *Stella del mattino* (Einaudi 2008), centred on the figure of Lawrence of Arabia. The collective's site is www.wumingfoundation.com

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