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This Childish Task

Author(s): Javier Marías and Margaret Jull Costa

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Josef Sudek, *Untitled*, 1965

MISCELLANY

## This Childish Task

Javier Marías

MOST OF my bookshelves are guarded, protected, and defended by small tin soldiers from various armies and eras; one shelf is even under the protection of a civilian population, not made of tin this time, but of hard, high-quality German plastic. The soldiers are arranged in ranks and are all of the same size or pretty much in proportion, both those on foot and those on horse- or camel-back (there are a lot of colonial troops), whereas the civilians are a chaotic mixture, belonging to very different social spheres: there are even wild animals and racehorses galloping past baggage-laden train passengers and dancing couples, and some figures look like giants beside the smaller ones, while the latter look like Lilliputians beside the former. I suppose this isn't entirely coincidental, although I tend to believe that it is. In civil society, everything is less orderly and more confused; discipline is minimal—if it isn't, it means we're living under a dictatorship, and having suffered under one of those for far too long, I certainly

don't want another one, not even on my bookshelves—and so, in a way, all kinds of absurdities, inconsistencies, and monstrosities are acceptable. In real armies, as in novels, this is impossible or at the very least inadvisable.

I suppose that this liking of mine for diminutive worlds has two sides to it, one childish, one literary—although this perhaps comes to the same thing. It clearly has its roots in part in my childhood. Children have an extraordinary capacity for noticing the very tiny, but more than that, for penetrating and inhabiting and breathing fictional life into it. I don't know how it is nowadays, but boys' fantasies always used to be either military or athletic in tone and found expression in disguises, toy soldiers, and, if you were lucky, a toy fort that was repeatedly besieged by Indians. Girls, I imagine, concentrated on, became absorbed by or wrapped up in the sheer tininess of dolls' houses (that was the norm, although there were always exceptions and reversals: bellicose girls and domesticated boys).

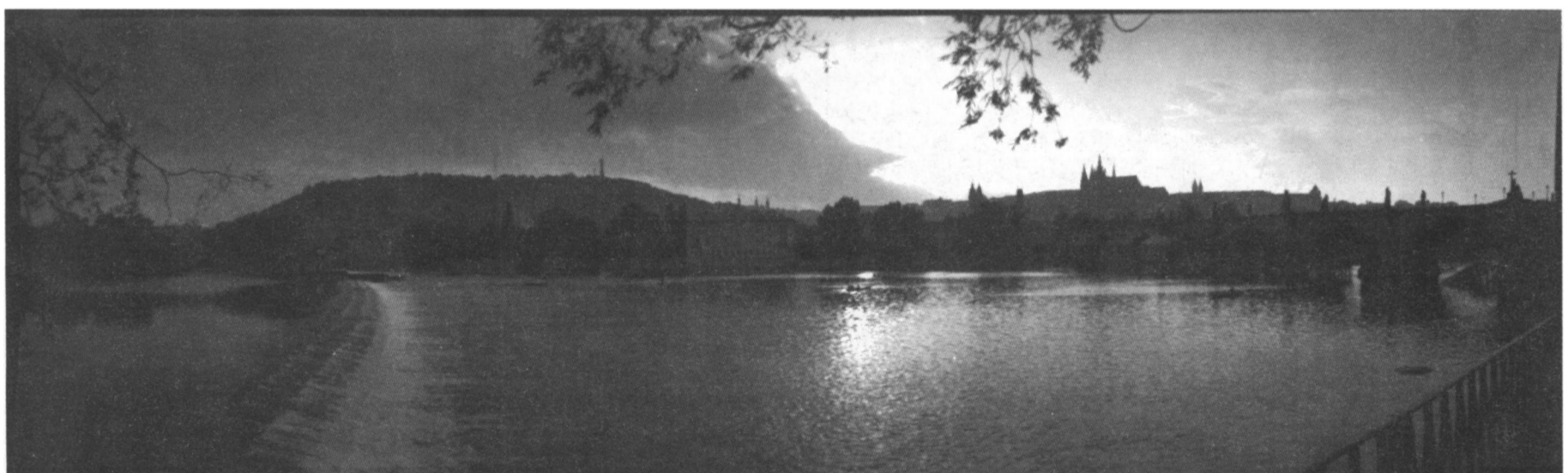
For both, however, this was an initiation into fiction—by which I mean creative fiction, invented by them and full of all kinds of possibilities, a fiction in which they were obliged to invent the story, the adventure, the plot, however schematic or mimetic these might be; comics, movies, and books, on the other hand, represented fiction received or inherited, but which in turn served as models and stimuli for creation or re-creation. When you think about it, those games in which, by following certain rules or conventions and trying always to keep within the bounds of plausibility, one decided the fates and vicissitudes of soldiers or dolls were probably a first decisive step towards writing fiction. Or, of course, filming it.

The fact that my bookshelves are still crowded with tin soldiers is due in part, I think, to my refusal entirely to lose sight of the very modest origins of the novels I write. Hanging on to them as an adult, keeping them there before me in serried ranks, prepared and on guard, is, in a way, a reminder of the childish nature of what has been my principal occupation over many days and many years now, a salutary puncturing of the importance of that task (there's nothing worse for a writer than to take himself too seriously and to believe that what he's doing is important or even significant), as well as an

act of loyalty. I always keep in mind those lines by Robert Louis Stevenson in which, when he compares himself to his ancestors, who were builders of lighthouses, he cannot help but feel the insignificance of his chosen trade, and he begs for a little understanding: "Say not of me that weakly I declined the labours of my sires, and fled the sea, the towers we founded and the lamps we lit, to play at home with paper like a child."

I like to remind myself that this really is all I do, namely, devote myself "to this childish task," as Stevenson calls it in the same poem ("But rather say: In the afternoon of time a strenuous family dusted from its hands the sand of granite, and beholding far along the sounding coast its pyramids and tall memorials catch the dying sun, smiled well content, and to this childish task around the fire addressed its evening hours"); but I also like to have before me the probable origin of my chosen career, to have it there physically, corporeally, in that large army of silent, expectant, motionless figures who nevertheless, like the characters in a novel when a novel is still in its very early stages of being written, seem as if they might start walking and talking and thus experiencing some possible story of which I was the sole witness and which, therefore, no one else can tell. □

(Translated from the Spanish by Margaret Jull Costa)



Josef Sudek, *Untitled*, 1975