

# Fictional Guidenotes

to Sir John Soane's Museum, Lincoln's Inn Fields

by Bernard Cohen, *writer-in-residence*

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## A Journey to Places Previously Undescribed

Silence. She is staring at the blank ceiling. Every now and then, the intervals almost unbearable to her, a clock chimes. Sometimes two clocks will sound, one tinging high notes, one more resonant, counting to ten; after another eternity, they count to eleven.

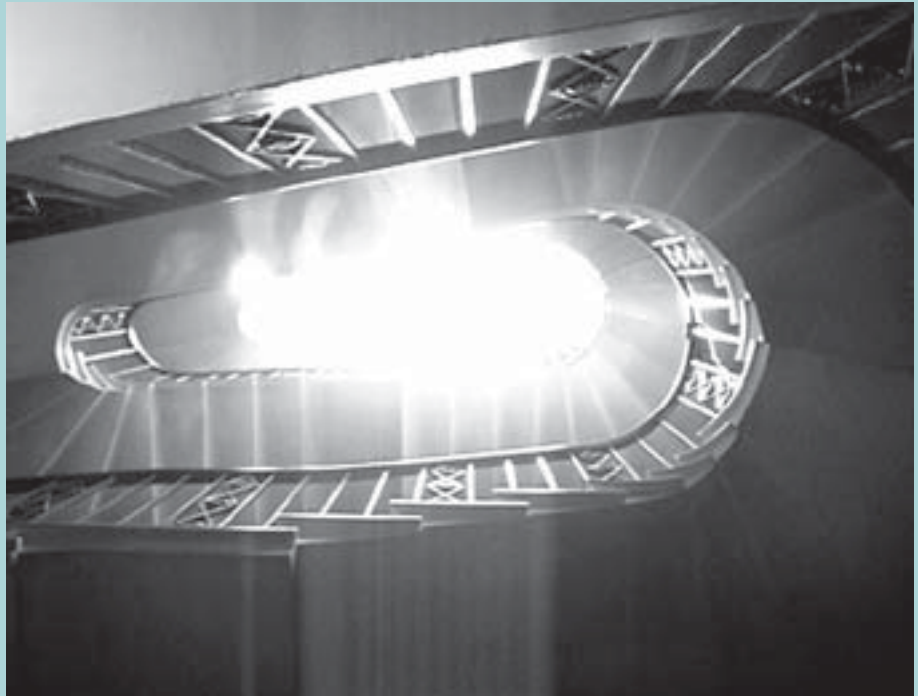
She wills herself to relax. The ceiling is blank. She finds herself no more and no less calm than she had been. She notices the quality of the silence, that there is, as ever, a faint hum outside, as

though a swarm of harmless insects circled, always equidistant. Perhaps dawn will come soon enough, and daylight will allow her sleep. The ceiling remains unchanging. She watches it.

An owl calls. A dog barks. Perhaps that ever-present hum is the wind. She hears a sudden cackle of laughter from somewhere outside.

And then, all the clocks call at once.

It occurs to her that she is thirsty. She takes up her water glass from beside the pillow, but the water



tastes sharply of alcohol. That's funny, she thinks. I never drink wine in bed. I will have to rinse my glass and refill it.

Her curiously heavy bedclothes lie at the foot of the bed as though she had kicked them off. She is covered only by a sheet. Now she rises, leaves the room and descends a stair. She stumbles and grabs for the banister; she had expected to reach a level and the stair had surprised her by continuing to descend. Her instinctive way of moving does not work. She rights herself. I could have fallen, and

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## Contribute your own fictional guidenotes to Soane's Museum

Museum visitors and friends are invited to contribute their own writing about objects, spaces and ideas from Sir John Soane's Museum. To contribute, or to read others' contributions, please visit the museum website at <http://www.soane.org/fictional>. You may also email your contribution to [bernard.cohen@kcl.ac.uk](mailto:bernard.cohen@kcl.ac.uk). Finally, you may post your contribution on disk to Bernard Cohen, writer-in-residence, Sir John Soane's Museum, Lincoln's Inn Fields, London WC2A 3BP, United Kingdom. Please send email or post contributions in text-only or rich text format.

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then who would have found me? I could have lain there with a bone snapped through, unable to shout because of the silence. How long would I then wait to be discovered?

She reaches the bottom. She empties her glass into a basin and refills it from a jug. This time she tastes water, very cold. *Very* cold, she thinks. She sips her water slowly. The whole house is extraordinarily cold. She finishes, and leaves the empty glass for daylight. Instead of ascending to her room, she continues straight ahead, towards a doorway. She hears muttering and moves towards it. She fails to remember that one should not move towards such noises.

The doorway awaits and she steps through. No one is there. The room is silent. She must have been mistaken about the voice. Of course she had been mistaken. She knows no one is downstairs at this hour. In the room, her black cabin trunk (had it not been tan?) lies open on the table, packed with clothes she does not recognise. Yet they are mine, she thinks. She closes the trunk; its clasps seal with a secure snap. Several large black feathers fall to the ground. Someone must have pressed them on the lid. Unusual, she thinks. This has not happened before. The trunk's handle is in her hand. She is holding it. She must be about to leave, to go somewhere. Is it still night? Will I travel at night? She carries the cabin trunk back through the doorway. Immediately she believes she can hear muttering.

'Shhh,' she says aloud. The muttering, if that's what it was, stops. That's better.

From above, another sound commences; it's like footsteps on the carpet, a pattern, as though someone danced to inaudible music. She hears the scratch of a pen and a sigh. The scratch of a pen, more rapid. The muttering begins again and this time she dares not hush it.

She climbs the flight of stairs towards the footsteps and finds herself in a moonlit room. She is carrying

the cabin trunk. I had not noticed its weight. The footsteps no longer sound.

It is not as she would have expected; in the usual order, the volume of a sound increases as one approaches. Confusion of this kind would never happen in England, she thinks, because there one knows where one stands. England has a clarity one cannot find elsewhere. The air is regular and one can rely on the colours of the countryside and of towns exactly meeting expectations.

She smiles, reassured by the thought. Then her face becomes serious once more.



I *am* in England, she reminds herself. She opens her cabin trunk and finds that she has forgotten to pack a diary. And what if something should happen that she needs to remember? I cannot rely on having access to my letters home, for my correspondents often live several miles away. My husband's memory is faulty; besides, he is not here. The diary is necessary.

In the corner of the trunk is a folded sheet of thick paper. She pulls it away from the clothing and opens it out. It is a map or a plan, of what she cannot tell. A building, perhaps, and these are the rooms? Or a continent and these are its principalities.

She turns her head left and right, expecting to see her diary. There it is, on the side table, a large green

volume. She lifts it, but without sufficient care. The diary falls open at a date she does not recognise (is there a month named K—?) and she sees the handwriting is not her own. Or it could be mine, with the left hand. She thinks she might read it, but the words are momentarily indecipherable and she finds herself in a great hurry.

Once more the cabin trunk is closed and in hand. She descends the stair and then descends a second flight that must have been there all along. Poverty seems to be at its foot, for there are no carpets.

She turns left, walks through a doorway and a little further and soon finds herself at a waterway. A boat awaits, manned by silent, shirtless oarsmen. She steps in unassisted.

Still secured, the boat rolls gently in the river's tug. Her oarsmen do not speak yet she understands them to desire the map. As the trunk's lid swings open on her lap, the boat rocks to one side then the other. Keep an even keel, she thinks. I am funny and serious. She draws out the map and sees it is different from her earlier impression. These are animals, here and here, but their features are human. The sensation is of familiarity rather than strangeness. Why should this be? The map traces a circular route. Despite this, she knows that if she were to follow the route, she would not return to her setting off point.

The lead oarsman has the map and they shall navigate by its reckoning. The oarsman slaps his hands together.

*May the sun rise tomorrow and the moon by night  
May stars slide in concert through true-black sky  
May rivers flow seaward, seas respect tides  
That though beasts tread earth, we sail and winds fly.*

The little boat is free of the bank. She is standing on the trunk. She can see to the edge of... she can see to the edge.

Horned men grin from the bank on her left. Someone waves and appears to call out, but she cannot hear what, if anything, he has said. To her

right she might be frightened or at least surprised to see dragons. She regards them with benignity, and they do not disturb her journey.



Now they pause as the boat pulls into a fearsome lock constructed not with a pair of gates and sluicing mechanisms, but with encompassing walls of intense fire. The travellers are perspiring. She can see rivulets of moisture trickling down the oarsman's back. There is no way through. For the first time she feels terror. I am going to die here. I will burn amidst water. The lead oarsman turns awkwardly and holds up his palm to reassure her. She understands that they have reached a border, and must complete its formalities.

They pass through the gate and continue forward. Ahead, past temples crowded with chanting, beyond plaques setting out the history of the world and of its rulers, past river banks swarming with serpents or deer, beyond the exertions of workers on the building sites and the chisel of masons upon stone, she can see another flame-lit gate.

The boat rides through the long-lasting twilight, its rudder steady. At the gate, encircled by flames, she is once more seized by great fear. But why should this be different from the previous border?

They pass through and it *is* different. In this land all is inverted. Parents mourn their children and



stoneworkers carve  
memorials for the  
living. She feels deep  
sadness. Her lips  
pucker but she cannot  
cry. If only my  
husband were here,  
she thinks. And then:  
No. It is right to travel  
alone.

Birds of all species  
freeze as they pass.  
Goat-footed men trot  
by, their minds

elsewhere. She sees a woman and a swan, locked  
together in embrace. A man and a centaur tread  
past, arms entwined.

They reach another gate, guarded by a serpent as  
long as the river on which they travel. It fixes them  
with its stony eyes, flicks its tongue. The air fills  
with orange heat. She stares back, refuses to flinch.  
They pass.

In this new country, beasts stalk on leonine  
haunches, or march together kicking up dust. Dogs  
run here and there, sometimes alone, sometimes in  
packs. The sky is filled with dragons, yet the trees  
bear unearthly quantities of the finest fruit and  
amphorae overflow with quenching liquid.

They reach a field filled with shrieking cicadas.  
There was a similar sound long ago, she thinks.  
Where was that? The land is like nowhere she has  
seen and yet she feels welcome.

Here are hundreds of people smiling at a national  
celebration. Here all animals from dreams and  
nightmares gather and need for nothing. Here she  
no longer feels pain. From amongst the crowd, a  
curious creature steps forward, fleshless and of  
grotesque form. Its femurs are uneven, its ribs of all  
different hues and one arm hangs noticeably lower  
than the other, as though a dozen skeletons had  
each contributed a bone. It stands and turns  
towards her. Its jaw opens and shuts, and it seems  
to ask, 'Have you come to stay?'

She indicates her black cabin trunk. She wants to  
say, 'I am on a journey,' but she cannot pronounce  
the sound 'I'.



#### Author's Note

Elements of the journey described resemble that  
depicted around the sarcophagus of Seti I, held in  
Sir John Soane's Museum, and the 'views'  
therefrom. The idea for the creature of 'grotesque  
form' is based on a skeleton assembled for Soane by  
the sculptor John Flaxman (1755-1826), held in  
the museum though not currently on public  
display.

Susan Palmer's book *The Soanes at Home* (Sir John  
Soane's Museum, London, 1997) provided valuable  
information in the writing of the above piece.

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## About Fictional Guidenotes

*Fictional Guidenotes are written by Bernard Cohen, writer-in-residence at Sir John Soane's Museum. They will appear monthly from July to December 2002 and are also available via the museum website at <http://www.soane.org/fictional>. Also on that website are other fictional and less fictional writings related to the Museum, including contributions from members of the public. Your contribution is welcome. See the front of this publication for details. For more information about Bernard, please see his website at <http://www.hermes.net.au/bernard>.*

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