**Gravestone**

Ruadhán MacFadden

I once followed a ghost into the forest.

I met him in a graveyard near where I once lived in Heidelberg. Peaceful and dappled in the shade of summer sycamores, it served as a shortcut up the hillside. Sometimes I stopped and attempted, in some small way, to acknowledge the lives that had found their denouement there. Lives cut short by childhood illness, or by the war, or by the war after that. Old names that echoed of Weimar and faraway mountain villages.

Adelbert. Edeltraut. Gottlieb. Mechtild. Liselotte. Leopold.

There was one resident who always drew my eye. A certain Herr Palacký, his Slavic surname standing out among the rows of his *urdeutsch* bedfellows, his epitaph equally distinctive.

*TIEF DRIN IM BÖHMERWALD*

*DA LIEGT MEIN HEIMATORT*

(*Deep within the Bohemian Forest*

*There lies my home*)

And so, one chill Easter weekend, I left my car at a lonely parking lot and loped headfirst into the eastern woods, secretly wondering whether I was foolish to be there when the snows were still so deep. The Bavarian Forest to the Germans, the Bohemian Forest to the Czechs on the other side of the border, but it is the one forest, and always has been. Even those two competing names ultimately derive from the same source: the Celtic tribe known as the Boii (“herding people”) who inhabited this part of Central Europe during the Iron Age.

Boii. Herding people. I thought of the modern Irish word for cow (*bó*) and wondered if an ancestral version of it had ever been uttered under these darkened treetops.

I spent the first night in a family-run mountain hut. I was the only guest. The family’s adult son, Johannes, told me in rich, Bavarian-accented German of his time walking the Santiago de Compostela. Since the snow was so thick and the trails so empty, I would likely be the only person in the woods that weekend. Keep an eye out for the “Auerhuhn,” he recommended.

(I had to look that up. Capercallie.)

The Eurasian Lynx also glides through the trees here. “But you will never see those,” he said. “They’re too clever and too quiet. Like ghosts.”

There was a touch of the spectral to the forest as a whole. Hand-carved wooden memorials to men who died in logging accidents decades ago. Crosses marking the peaks of distant mountains. A silent plateau of scattered pine trees, their branches whispering ever so softly as I passed. Eventually the outline of a village emerged through undulating rifts in the fog.

I made my way down the mountain into Bayerisch Eisenstein, directly on the border with the Czech Republic. This quiet collection of red-roofed farmhouses and hearty schnitzel restaurants (population 1,000) was thus once a diminutive pleat in the Iron Curtain, as intently guarded as anywhere in faraway Berlin. The forest was full of barbed wire and mines. Nowadays you can cross the border accidentally while walking from one platform of the village train station to another.

I raised a glass of slivovice. Here’s to you, Herr Palacký.