

A selection from
HOTEL SAPIENS

2012

Translated by Hildi Hawkins

In Leena Krohn's novel Hotel Sapiens, technology also acquires life: science fiction narrative meets paranormal phenomena and conspiracy theories, religion encounters other beliefs. The book portrays the world after an ecological crisis and the fall of the economy. Depending on one's point of view, Hotel Sapiens is a prison and refugee camp or a research centre and museum that preserves something that may no longer exist.

Me and My Shadow

The fog banks have dissipated; the sky is empty. I cannot see the sails or swells in its heights, nor the golden cathedrals or teetering towers. I would not have believed I could miss a fog bank, but that's exactly what it's like: its disappearance is making me uneasy. For all its flimsiness and perforations it was our protection, our shield against the sun's fire and the stars' stings. Now the relentlessly blazing sun has awakened colours and extracted shadows from their hiding places. The moist warmth has dried into heat and the Flower Seller's herb spirals have dried up into skeletons. The leaves on the trees are full of bronze, sickly red and black spots. Though there is no wind and autumn is not yet here, they come loose as if of their own volition, as if they wanted to die.

This morning, as I was strolling up and down the park path as usual, I saw another shadow alongside my own.

– Ah, you're back! I said. – I wondered what had happened to you after you lost your shadow; how did you manage to change into your own shadow yourself?

– Here's how it happened, he eagerly began to recount. – I saw an advert for a car salesman in the area where I was living. It was my bad luck that it happened to be sunny that very morning. The head of the dealership himself approached me in the car lot, which was still empty, as the dust danced and sparkled in the sunlight. Once we had exchanged greetings, he started blathering on about the change to the inspection regulations and the difficulties of marketing a new make of car. But he broke off right in the middle of what he was saying and his face darkened. I saw him staring, disgruntled, at my feet. The full outlines of his own jet-black silhouette were sharply defined in the gravel. A beetle made its way in front of our shoes and the quavering shadow of its antennae advanced in time with its multiple pairs of legs. Only my contours were surrounded by a blinding sheen of the spring day. I was already anticipating a nasty remark.

– What kind of man are you to let go of your shadow? Did you sell it or pawn it? Or did it run away when you weren't able to bring it into line? he demanded.

– It had errands to run...it'll be back soon, I found myself stammering.

– Oh, I see, he said, spitefully drawing out his words, clearly not believing a bit of it.

– You wait there, he barked and disappeared into the office. I already knew I wasn't going to have any luck. Sure enough, the head of the dealership returned and said: – Sorry, the position's already been filled.

He knew that I knew he was lying, but there was no use in saying anything more. The next morning, when I was taking my last twenty out of the cash machine, I saw my own shadow against a brick wall.

– So there you are, I said. – You really left me in it yesterday. Don't you feel ashamed of yourself?

To my surprise, it replied to me in a voice befitting a shadow: whispered, yet fully comprehensible.

– Sorry about that, it said. – I had some expenditures of my own to deal with.

– I've never heard of a shadow having its own expenditures, I commented. – To say nothing of income.

– Even a shadow needs a day off now and then.

– Well, you've had one, so now let's get back to business as usual.

– I don't know, it sighed. – I'm really fed up with my current existence.

– We've all got our problems, I said coolly.

– Sure, it agreed. – I've noticed you've got plenty. Debts, woman trouble, you like a drink and can't find work.

– Those are private matters and are none of your business, I said, starting to get worked up.

– If only they weren't my business and weren't plain to see. But in my position I can't help seeing and hearing things, it grumbled. – It's extremely frustrating to follow you everywhere and be forced to copy your every gesture. So yes, I have distanced myself a bit. And, if I may, I'd like to make a suggestion.

– Let's hear it, I said.

– What if we swapped places? came the whisper.

– How? I couldn't help laughing. – Are you proposing that I should become my own shadow? Or rather, your shadow?

– I think it would come as a relief to you, it said. – You don't deserve to be a person, if I may be so bold. You're a dreamer and a loafer, not a man of action. A *Taugenichts*, as the Germans would say. You're caught in a trap, literally. And all your instant loans? Work doesn't appeal to you, that's obvious. And you've been unlucky in love. You haven't succeeded as a person. I'm offering you a release from the burden of your species. Join the ranks of the shadows! Seize the opportunity!

– And you would take on my burden, is that the deal?

– I've got all sorts of ideas, it replied vaguely. – I'll go and do things.

– You think people are free to do whatever they want. Well, you're wrong! We end up wanting to do what we're doing.

– I'm waiting, it whispered impatiently.

To my surprise, I heard myself say: – On one condition. I get to drift around wherever I want. You'll take on my role and I yours, but we will no longer live together. You'll get to find out what it's like to live without a shadow, too.

– Agreed, it whispered.

No sooner had it said that than I felt myself changing and dissipating. The parts of me that were flesh began to melt; the parts that were bone began to soften and blood to cool. My limbs dissolved into a stream of darkness and I ceased to feel the air, temperature and gravity. I instantly lost one dimension – mass, without which we are not human. I lost the burden of my flesh, while my former shadow took up that cross with delight.

The previous day, I had still been a man without a shadow. Now I had become a shadow without a man.

I was surprised at how appealing this sort of metamorphosis proved to be. I was now completely flat, merely two-dimensional. Part of me was vertical against the brick wall of the bank, while my legs were refracted into horizontal bands on the pavement.

As I grew darker, I could see my former shadow growing and getting brighter and clearer, filling out. It assumed my weak-willed contours, got my sparse hair, put on my former unstylish clothes. But oh, how it knew how to wear them!

– See ya round, it said, turning towards the boulevard, its arms swinging casually, in my trench coat, my stripy scarf knitted by my wife flapping in the west wind. I was left with just the shadow of the scarf, and it had been standing on my shadow neck since then.

With good posture, self-confidence and full of a desire for victory, but without a shadow, it stepped into the world of people as if it had always lived there. As I watched it, I recalled the lyrics of an old May Day song:

*As if into the sun
Stride along your path
As if you were kings
And yours was every land!*

I watched my former shadow walking along the sunny street until the crowd obstructed him from my view, and I thought: that's how a person ought to live! I just didn't know how.

I haven't seen him since. Let him go on living with his own fate. Maybe he managed to pay off my loans and my rent; maybe he made my wife happier than I knew how. But what business are their lives of mine any longer? I've changed species, left my humanness behind and now I drift wherever I drift. I am not a doer but a watcher; I went across into the audience. I look, I listen, I observe – that's where I get my pleasure. I quickly got used to my new role and developed a liking for it. I hadn't guessed the lightness, almost cheerfulness, which two-dimensionality brought with it. Of course, I've had to give up many of the benefits of having a physical body, such as pleasures of the palate and the flesh, but what harm is there in that when I also shed the desire for those human pastimes? I am spared numerous addictions and stomach complaints, discomfort, jealousy and sorrow. I no longer own anything, not even a body; but neither do I owe anything to anyone. The role of a shadow, in all its irresponsibility, seems to me all the more fortunate. I cannot influence the course of events, merely follow the development of matters. But did I actually influence anything when I was a person? The way I see it, most people live something of a similar life to us shadows, the only difference being that they think they are constantly changing the course of events.

I don't need anywhere to live, anything to eat or drink. I can thrive outdoors, if need be, even in the depths of winter. I am invulnerable; illness cannot strike me down, nor fire burn me, nor floods drown me. I do not yet know whether shadows also grow old and die. I'm inclined to think that sooner or later I will fade and become less distinct, so that when my time is over, I will no longer be distinguishable from my surroundings.

I am an invisible witness. It is rewarding, as you can believe. I am amazed by the species into which I myself was born back in the day. When I was living as a person, my own kind did not interest me very much, but now that I've changed into a shadow, I see them as an onlooker, I observe them for the sheer pleasure of it, and if I deepen my attention a bit, I can even hear what they're thinking. That way I can sense the memories not only of my own acts, but theirs as well.

You may wonder why I stick around with you here, as no one can force a shadow to go where it doesn't want to go. At first I stayed out of pure curiosity, but since then I've stayed with you out of habit, even attachment. When I watch you, I believe that people can adapt to anything, to any conditions at all. That's what people live on, what they subsist on, even here at the Hotel Sapiens.

And then he was gone again. The leaves were swirling around in the sand in front of the steps to the Hotel Sapiens; they danced as if they had a spirit and a life-force, and their shadows danced as well. I watched one of them, a yellow one with black hieroglyphs. Could I predict where that playful leaf would end up when its whirl was over? It chooses nothing, swirled by the whims of the circumstances. Even if I knew the mathematics of chaos, I still wouldn't be able to calculate its endpoint or learn the number of alternatives.

I myself still make choices, albeit increasingly rarely here at the Hotel Sapiens, from an ever-smaller number of alternatives.

As for what is true, the mind knows very little. Growing into a person is growing into imagination. What is it that we imagined? That which we called reality.